STREET SPIRIT

Volume 11, No. 2 February 2005 $1.00

A publication of the American Friends Service Committee

JUSTICE NEWS & HOMELESS BLUES IN THE BAY AREA

The Message of Mary Jesus

The suicide of Mary Jesus was a prophetic warning, written in blood and death, that rent hikes and evictions destroy the lives of the poor.

by Lynda Carson

On December 10, 2004, tragedy struck downtown Oakland, when a 33-year-old woman who felt brutalized by Oakland's kangaroo courts plunged to her death from the Oakland Tribune Tower.

Mary Jesus, a longtime Oakland renter, had a message that she wanted to get out to the public at large, and she was willing to sacrifice her own life to do so.

On that fateful day, Mary Jesus stood high above the crowd down below, and gazed upon hundreds of people gathered on the sidewalks beneath the Tribune Tower, as they shouted out to her not to do it. Local attorney Bob Salinas was one of those in the crowd that tried to save her as he frantically yelled to her not to jump.

A moment before she died in a crushing pool of blood on the sidewalk seven stories below, Mary Jesus responded to the crowd by tossing down hundreds of copies of the suicide note that she wanted everyone to read.

All too often in American society, many people feel they are being pushed over the edge by greedy profiteers and the corrupt legal system that caters to their needs. According to Oakland attorney Matthew Siegal, Mary Jesus was one of those people that had been chewed up and spit out by Oakland's brutal eviction system.

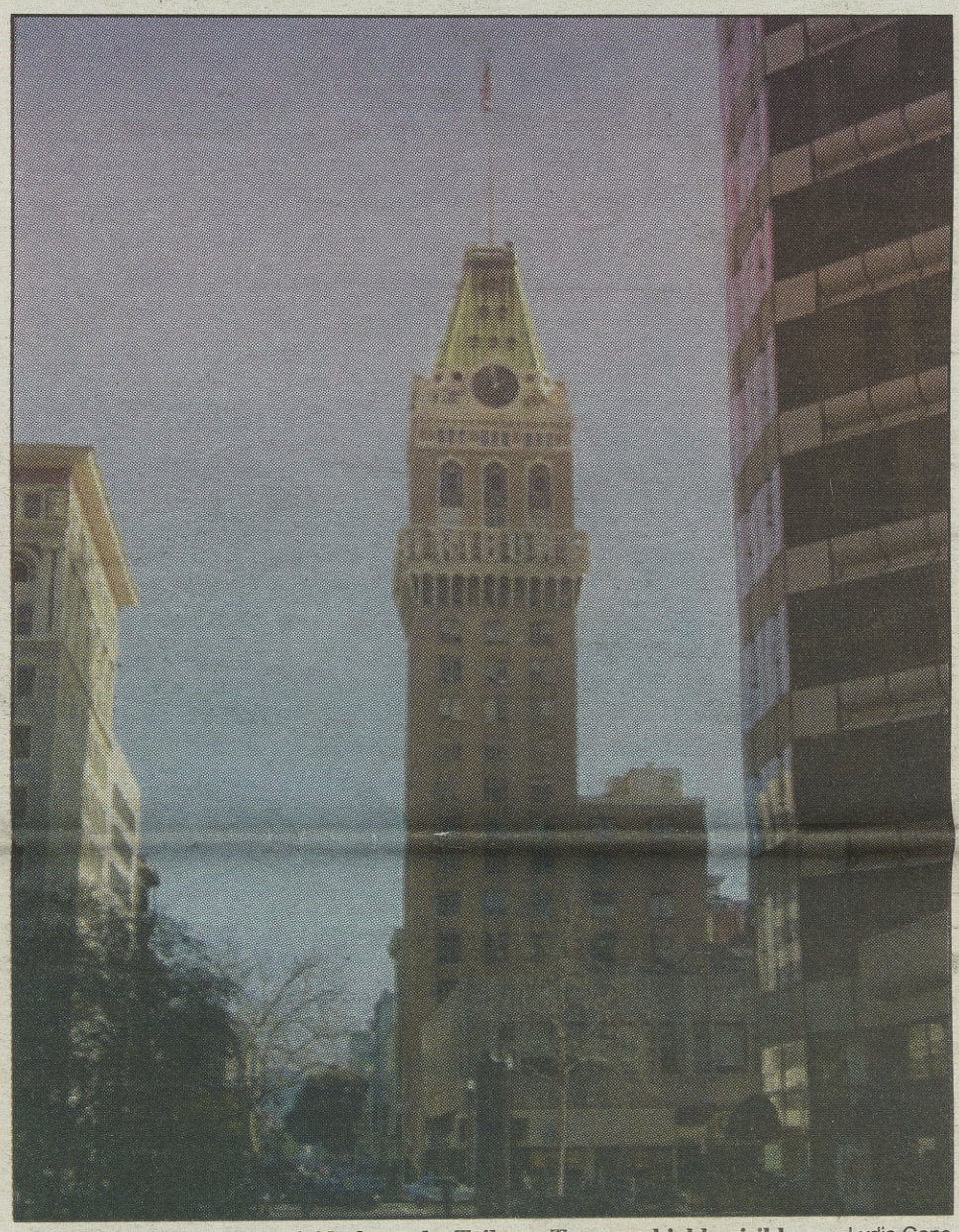
"Mary Jesus had evidence that the appeal process was all screwed up," said Siegal. "The judicial system is biased against tenants and it chewed her up and spit her out. This case was not about rent; it was all about pushing her over the edge."

About 50 people came to an Oakland memorial on January 10 for Mary Jesus. "There were many people there that witnessed the suicide and were looking for closure," Siegal said.

Marion Vale of San Francisco was with Mary Jesus during her last evening on earth, and she states that Mary Jesus had taken her own life to bring attention to those that had forced her over the edge.

The suicide note mentions four names that Mary Jesus wanted exposed. In the suicide note, Mary Jesus starts by writing: "Mark Roemer, James Lewis and Dean Miller. They are the catalyst!" Alameda County Superior Court Judge Yolanda Northridge was the only other name mentioned in the suicide note of Mary Jesus.

As it turned out, Mark F. Roemer and James L. Lewis were the landlords that owned the apartment building where Mary Jesus resided at 1515 Alice Street in Oakland. Dean Miller was the attorney representing the landlords trying to evict her, and Judge Yolanda Northridge had ordered her eviction from the home she had loved for so many years.



Mary Jesus committed suicide from the Tribune Tower, a highly visible media building and one of Oakland's most well-known landmarks. Lydia Gans photo

In her last act on earth, Mary Jesus had pointed her finger at these four individuals, who in her mind had apparently held the keys of life or death to the world that she had loved and cherished.

On January 20, 2005, I reached Juanita Moore, the court clerk for Judge Yolanda Northridge, to ask how this tragedy could have come about. Both the clerk and the judge declined to comment on what had occurred in their courtroom and how it led to the death of Mary Jesus.

Also on January 20, I contacted Dean Miller at his residence in Piedmont and he confirmed that not only was he the attorney that went after Mary Jesus, but also that James Lewis and Mark Roemer are some longtime high school friends of his from Piedmont High, many years ago.

This trio of friends were the ones that Mary Jesus had named in her suicide note as the "catalyst" that led to her personal tragedy of eviction and suicide.

Mary Jesus had resided for 13 years at the beautiful Dunsmuir Apartments at 1515 Alice Street in downtown Oakland. The 29-unit apartment building, built in 1912, was loaded with beautifully crafted oak trim on the doors and the windows that added a look of elegance and old world charm to the spacious building.

The records show that the Dunsmuir Apartments were bought on January 16, 1998, for $1,320,000 by the landlords of Mary Jesus, listed as the Dunsmuir Apartments Limited Liability CX.

To get to the heart of the message that Mary Jesus had wanted so desperately to give to the public at large, one must first take a look at a press release that she sent out to media outlets on October 27, 2004, less than two months before her death.

Her press release reads as follows:

"This is a newsworthy story that the public would definitely be interested in. The Building I live in, in downtown Oakland, was purchased five years ago. I had already been living here for seven years. I was the manager for a brief period of three years, then fired without cause. They have harassed me consistently since then. Even attempting to evict me in July of 2003, then again in September of 2004. I am very poor, so had to represent myself. It seemed to me that this particular judge (Yolanda Northridge) a Superior Court Judge in the limited jurisdiction, has a tendency to decide against Pro Per litigants. My case NEVER should have gone as far as it went, because the Oakland rental board had already stated that I did not owe the landlords any money. They sought to evict me anyway;

See **Message of Mary Jesus** *page two*

another homeless person died

by Judy Jones

another homeless person just died
another homeless person died
and not one person cried
not one person cried

cause its just another
homeless person that died
not people like you and me
like you and me

someone's dying in the gutter
somewhere
dying in the gutter somewhere
with nothing but their soul laid bare
nothin but their soul laid bare

a homeless chile is eating from a
garbage can
eating from a garbage can
and not one person sees
not one person sees

an old woman fell on the street
cause she'd had nothin to eat
nothin to eat
an old woman fell on the street

tonight i looked in the mirror and cried
for i saw my own soul had died
my soul had died

Holocaust Museum for the Poorest of the Poor

by Judy Jones

In the holocaust museum
for the poorest of the poor will lie
all the tears fears
shrieks and moans
of the millions who died
on cold concrete streets

walking in the door
walls seep blood
coffin after coffin
of no-name graves
will haunt each
visitor's face

no one can escape nor change
the holocaust
of the poorest of the poor
all over earth's shores

each visitor may claim
a grave of their own and
their names will stand for
the no-name that died

and before our eyes will be
pictures of those living on the streets
hands stretched out
for one tiny morsel of
human love

all their misery and pain
coming back to claim
those hardened hearts
that refused to see
the homeless person
dying on the streets
was, is, you and me

If She Hadn't Been Evicted, She Would Still Be Alive

A remembrance of Mary Jesus from a friend who gave her refuge on her last night on earth.

by V. Vale

I'm known as a punk rock book publisher in some circles; and for this reason Mary Jesus called me up, out of the blue, back in 1999, wanting me to publish a book by her. She called late at night and we talked for several hours. She told me she had been a hardcore punk rocker starting at age 15 when she ran away from home, and began telling me anecdotes about the punk underground scene.

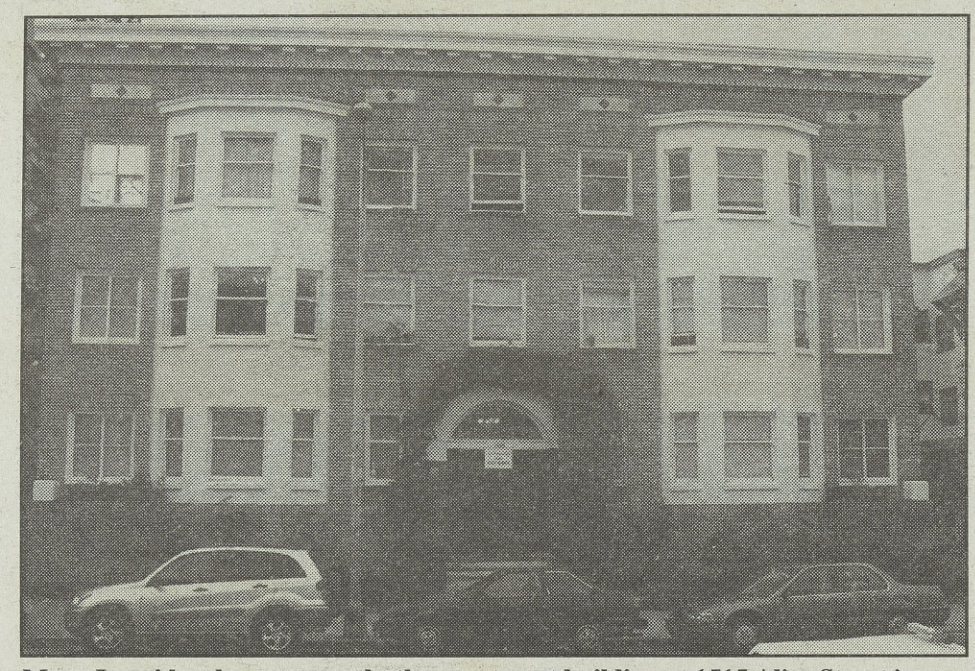
She was very intelligent, witty, charming and acerbic — absolutely full of ideas and opinions on everything wrong with society and the world. So I listened. Every couple months she would call me up, always late at night, and we'd talk for hours. She was very entertaining.

Mary Jesus continued to call me every couple months. When she first called me, she had told me that she lived in an apartment building in Oakland, and that she was the manager of the building. Her apartment was her refuge from the world and she almost always stayed at home. The only place she could normally afford to go was the public library.

We finally met in person in June 2001. The S.F. Art Institute hosted a book release party celebrating my new book, *Real Conversations*, featuring Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jello Biafra, and others. The event was so hectic I could only spend a couple minutes with her. She asked me to sign her book, which she had splurged on for the occasion.

At some point, her beloved apartment building was sold to investors or real estate speculators who apparently terminated Mary Jesus as manager, but I didn't find this out until last year when she started telling me her about tenancy problems.

Around August 2004, she told me she was in danger of being evicted: "My new landlords want to evict me because I've been here a long time and they think my rent is too low — they think they can get two or three times what I'm paying."



Mary Jesus' last home on earth: the apartment building at 1515 Alice Street in Oakland where she lived for 13 years before being evicted and committing suicide.

If indeed the act of eviction killed her, then something is wrong with the social system that inadequately protects low-income persons from being evicted.

But she was intelligent, proud, and literate; and she told me she was confident she was going to win if things went to court, because she was in the right, and because she had started spending weeks at a law library learning the laws, and was determined to get a jury trial for her case. She believed in justice and her own honesty.

If I had life to live over again, I would have immediately said, "NO! You *need* to get a lawyer *right away*. There are pro bono (free) lawyers." But I just listened to Mary Jesus and silently applauded her determination to argue her own case in front of a jury and judge.

Later, after the case had progressed to her appeal, I tried to help her find legal representation. It then became obvious that if your case has already gone to court, no free lawyer will touch you with a ten-foot pole.

When she finally called, she said, "If I'm evicted tomorrow, I have no choice but to kill myself. I have no resources, no savings, no money, and nowhere to go. I live on permanent G.A. (about $336 a month) and am classified as 'totally disabled.' It's better to die on your feet than live on your knees."

I invited her to stay at my place. She said, "But I love my apartment — I've been here 13 years. It's full of all my beautiful things. I can't start over. I just can't."

Finally the day came, December 8, 2004, when Mary Jesus called late in the afternoon and said, "I'm in the loony bin. Last night I set fire to my apartment and tried to hang myself in my closet." She seemingly joked, "It's not so easy to kill yourself." But I was just on my way out, and couldn't talk to her then, and just quipped back, "At least you have a place to stay tonight." She left a phone number — the pay phone in the ward, which netted no answer the next day.

But that afternoon Mary Jesus called while I wasn't home, and talked to my wife Marian. Mary Jesus asked if it was still okay if she stayed with us. Marian said, "Yes," and Mary Jesus turned the phone over to a hospital administrator who merely asked for Marian's name and address, then handed the phone back to Mary Jesus. She apparently released Mary Jesus to her "custody" — oddly early, in retrospect, after a suicide attempt.

Mary Jesus came over and spent the night. Foolishly, I assumed she had gotten "suicide" out of her system, and had no idea that when she left for Oakland the next morning, she would throw herself off the Oakland Tribune Tower, or I wouldn't have let her leave. She left with a list of errands we had helped her plan out the night before, in order to get her life back on track: cashing a money order at the post office, putting in a change of address notice, getting a new G.A. card (all had been lost in the staged fire).

I learned another lesson: If someone threatens to commit suicide, you had better take the threat ultra-seriously, *and* do anything you can to make them feel 100 percent safe and secure. I wish I had told her, "Listen, whatever it takes to get you into a new apartment, we'll take care of it. Don't worry about not having money. We'll take care of it." We can always find money for what *has to* be done.

When somebody kills herself, especially someone smart, intelligent, sarcastic and funny, it makes you feel very disturbed. I felt I knew Mary Jesus quite well through our lengthy phone calls over six years, yet had spent almost no time in the same room with her, ever. If she hadn't been evicted, I feel she would still be alive today, living a mostly reclusive life in her beautiful apartment-refuge, and hopefully writing her manuscript.

If indeed the act of eviction killed her, then something is wrong with the social system that inadequately protects low-income persons from being evicted from apartments they've inhabited a long time. Maybe a mandatory legal defense procedure with a tenant defense lawyer must be instituted? I don't know. But there is something very wrong with this picture.

Message of Mary Jesus

from page one

the judge allowed their attorney to stifle my evidence. It was all totally illegal!"

The above press release referred to an Oakland rental arbitration board case that Mary Jesus filed against the two owners of the Dunsmuir Apartments, where she was fighting an illegal rent increase. Even though the Oakland rental arbitration board had ruled in her favor as of September 1, 2004, because of an improper notification by the landlord, four weeks later Judge Yolanda Northridge of the Alameda County Superior Court overruled the rent board's decision, and ordered Mary Jesus to pay the landlords $1,018.77 in back rent and to vacate her long-term residence of the past 13 years.

Mary Jesus felt crushed by this cruel, corrupt, heartless system in Oakland, after having done everything possible to defend herself from the rent increase imposed upon her by the greedy landlords.

Any way that one looks at this tragedy, Mary Jesus was overwhelmed by a foursome of professionals wielding great power over her. The four of them were unrelenting in their efforts to run her out of the home she had lived in for 13 years, and the eviction resulted in the violence of her death by pushing her over the edge.

It is no secret that Oakland renters have been up against a brutal eviction-for-profit system for many years. Nor is it a secret that Oakland renters have held several protests these past few years against landlords and judges that act together to evict renters. Indeed, Superior Court Judge Yolanda Northridge is not the only judge in Oakland that has come under the scrutiny of the public during these past few years, nor shall she be the last.

The tragic message of Mary Jesus is a testimony written in blood and death. It cannot escape our attention, nor should it ever be ignored. She sacrificed herself to deliver her last message. The suicide note is her last testimony about a corrupt and brutal system in Oakland controlled by the rich and the powerful. Her suicide note stated:

"Mark Roemer, James Lewis and Dean Miller. They are the catalyst.

"Goodbye cruel world, and all that. Just look up the case, and you'll see why. Just listen to the August 31st 2004 Authenticated recording from rent adjustment. And everyone will say what they always say when something totally preventable wasn't prevented. 'Why didn't anybody do anything.' A couple of people did, but they had no power, and those that did have power were more concerned with technicalities, than justice. Except for Yolanda Northridge, she just does this to people too poor to afford an attorney, and attorneys only take your case if you have money. It's all about money! The love of money is the root of all evil!"

Mary Jesus

P.S. Just cremate me and I have no family.

PROFOUND IMPACT OF HER DEATH

The death of Mary Jesus had a profound impact on the deepest levels of my consciousness.

On December 20, 2004, I received a call from a dear friend, Sue Doyle. Sue works for a number of pro-tenant attorneys in Oakland that I happen to know. Sue told me the unfortunate news about the death of Mary Jesus. I felt stunned.

I had not seen Mary Jesus since the day I was wandering up and down Alice Street in Oakland on a warm Saturday afternoon, using a bullhorn to call tenants out of their sleepy apartments to sign a Just Cause (anti-eviction) petition. I was with Sue Doyle and John Reimann at that moment, and we were part of a group known as the Campaign for Renters Rights.

People streamed out of their apartments that day to join us and sign the petitions we had brought with us. Some of the landlords were screaming at us from their buildings and threatening to call the cops if we did not start moving along.

Sue Doyle had briefly met Mary Jesus that sunny afternoon as we were out collecting signatures for an initiative that rewrote Oakland's rent laws, and gave the renters some protections from unfair evictions and the eviction-for-profit system.

Once upon a time, I had resided on Alice Street in a lovely building for about eight years; and I lived directly across the street from Mary Jesus for much of that

See **Message of Mary Jesus** *page 14*

Street Spirit

Street Spirit is published by **American Friends Service Committee.** The vendor program is run by **BOSS (Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency.**

Editor, Layout, Design: Terry Messman

Contributors: David Bacon, Claire J. Baker, Bill Berkowitz, Andy Block, Jack Bragen, Bill Carpenter, Lynda Carson, Joan Clair, Eileen Corder, Carol Denney, Joel Fallon, Randy Fingland, Leonard Roy Frank, Lydia Gans, Anna Graves, Annette Herskovits, Becky Johnson, Kaethe Kollwitz, Doug Minkler, San Francisco Print Collective, Holly Sklar, Norman Solomon, Robert L. Terrell, Edvino Ugolini, V. Vale, Marion Vale, Mara Voukydis

All works copyrighted by the authors.

The views expressed in *Street Spirit* articles are those of the individual authors alone, and not necessarily that of the American Friends Service Committee.

Street Spirit welcomes submissions of articles, poems, photos and art. Please keep your own copy of any work sent.
Contact: **Terry Messman**
Street Spirit/AFSC
1515 Webster St., Suite 303
Oakland, CA 94612
Phone: **(510) 238-8080, ext. 303**
E-mail: **spirit@afsc.org**

A Prophetic Warning About Deadly Effects of Eviction

Editorial by Terry Messman

"I worry all the time like I never did before.
I ain't got no home in this world anymore."
— Woody Guthrie

Shortly before Christmas, Mary Jesus found that she had no home in this world anymore. Her landlord had raised the rent and then evicted her from the Oakland apartment she had lived in for 13 years. After her release from a brief stay at John George Psychiatric Pavilion, Mary Jesus found herself alone on the stark streets of Oakland, with no home in this world.

Although she had fought a valiant and lonely struggle against the eviction, she found herself homeless at Christmas time, just as the Biblical Mary and Jesus were without a home on the first Christmas.

Being evicted felt like the end of her life to Mary Jesus. As a disabled woman living on General Assistance, she saw nothing ahead but a destitute life on the dead-end streets. She told her friend V. Vale: "If I'm evicted tomorrow, I have no choice but to kill myself. I have no resources, no savings, no money, and nowhere to go."

She took her own life on December 10, 2004. To compound the tragedy, Mary Jesus died in despair because she owed her landlords only $1,018.77. The economic gap between rich and poor in America is rapidly becoming an unbridgeable chasm. There are two entirely separate classes of people: those who could come up with $1,000 in an emergency, and those unable to come up with it if their very life depended on it.

In her suicide note, Mary Jesus quoted a Biblical passage: "The love of money is the root of all evil." She was exactly right. The love of money turned out to be a death sentence for her. Her death stands as a permanent indictment of the greed of landlords and the inequities of a court system biased in favor of those with money and high-priced lawyers.

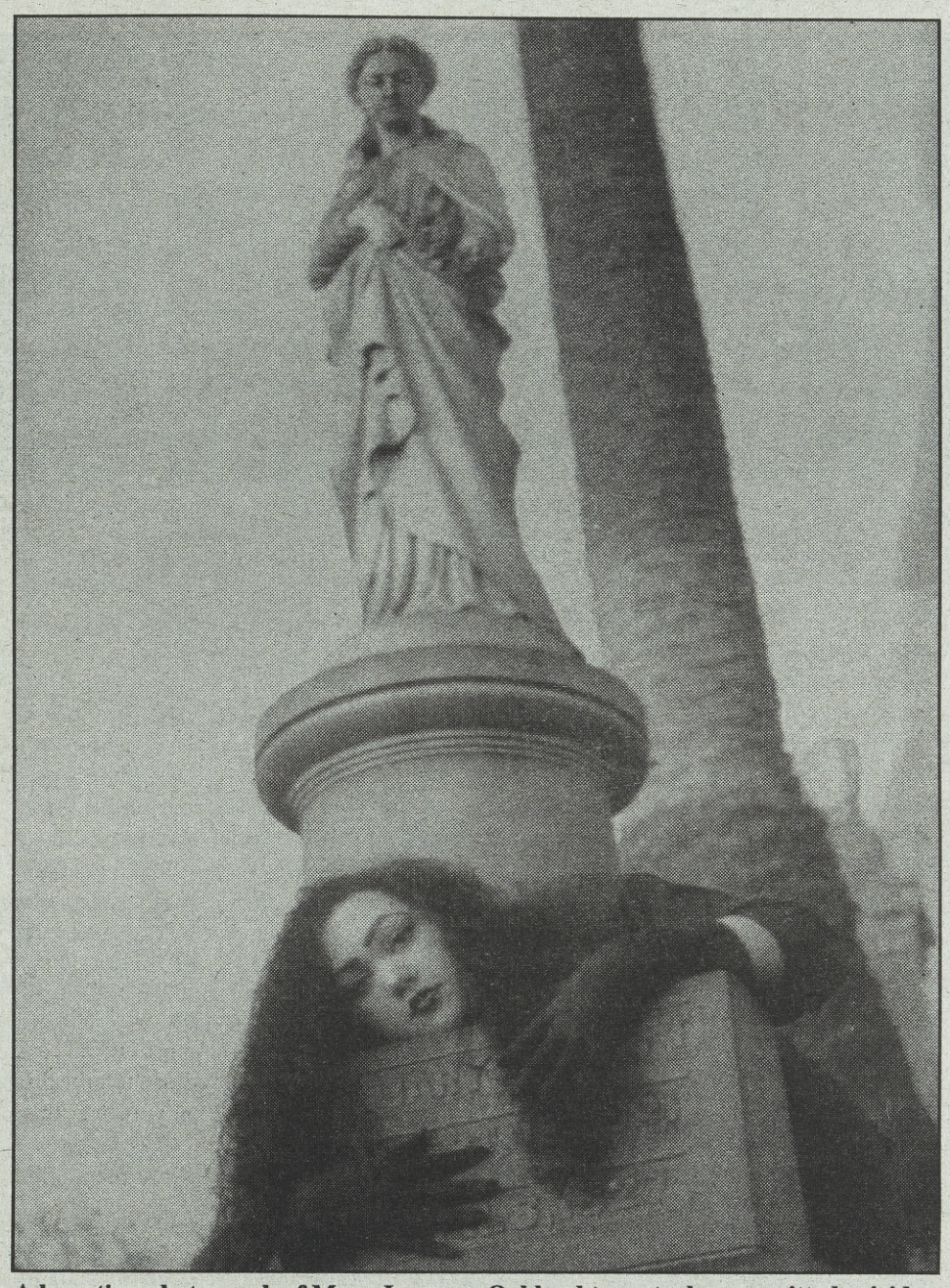
The suicide of Mary Jesus is a prophetic warning of what Mohandas Gandhi once declared: Poverty is the worst form of violence. Her shocking death occurred because she lost her struggle against the same economic forces that have sentenced so many Oakland tenants to desperation, eviction and homelessness.

Low-income tenants in Oakland have been besieged with a wave of rent hikes and evictions over the past several years, and tenant groups have long been warning that unjust evictions and resultant homelessness have grown to life-threatening dimensions. Virtually every housing agency, tenant attorney and homeless service provider in Oakland has warned that rent increases and evictions now amount to a form of "economic cleansing."

But just as Mary Jesus was a fighter in life, she continued her fight against the forces of greed and injustice even with her death. As Mary told V. Vale, "It's better to die on your feet than live on your knees." And as Elizabeth Day wrote to *Street Spirit* about her death, quoting the poet Dylan Thomas: "She chose a very public way to kill herself — she did not go gentle into that good night!"

She deliberately chose to end her life from atop the most prominent tower in Oakland, a newspaper building, a place where the press could scarcely ignore her suffering, the way they largely ignore the suffering of homeless people every day.

She took her suicide note to the top of the mountain, as did the prophets of old, and showered hundreds of copies down to the public gathered below. Then she plunged to her death and gave us all an unforgettable warning about how the avarice of landlords can join with the heartlessness of the court system to extinguish the lives of the poor.



A haunting photograph of Mary Jesus, an Oakland tenant who committed suicide.

Upon hearing of her death, Robert Mills, a longtime homeless activist and a student of Gandhian nonviolence, said that it was a self-immolation like the Buddhist monks who set themselves on fire to protest the Vietnam War. Just like those monks, Mary Jesus died to warn us how heartless this system has become.

She died to tell us that the love of money is the root of all evil, and that profiteering and evictions are lethal.

DEATH DURING THE HOLIDAY

Her unbearably sad death is made even more haunting because it occurred only two weeks before Christmas, a season when people try to stir themselves to remember the poor among us with sporadic acts of compassion. But Mary Jesus died of homelessness and heartbreak two weeks before those holiday meals for homeless people were held this year.

She died at Christmas time, a holiday for a mother who herself was reduced to homelessness and forced to give birth to a son, also homeless, born in a rude stable.

She died in the season of love and compassion. Mary Jesus died because a ruthless economic system, and the avaricious landlords who benefit from it, have made greed for profits the crowning value of all. Love for money has replaced reverence for human life as the highest value of our society. A country which places its highest value in money will sacrifice the lives of any of us to support landlords in their legalized pursuit of higher profits.

When I first heard of the death of Mary Jesus, I immediately flashed back to the beautifully radical words of the Magnificat uttered by Mary to greet her son's birth: "God has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich sent empty away." (*Luke* 1:52-53)

Those words from the Magnificat have inspired poor people in Latin America with their revolutionary call for justice for the poor. Liberation theologians cite Mary's words to show that God has made a "preferential option for the poor."

But in this world governed by ungodly greed and uncaring landlords and courts rigged for the rich, the legal system has made a "preferential option for the rich."

When landlords calculate their profits, raise their rents and order their evictions without ever calculating the human costs of their actions, I wonder if they are ever reminded of another businessman in *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens.

This seasonal masterpiece is a profound indictment of the unconscionable greed of landlords, moneylenders and evictors. Ebenezer Scrooge, an avaricious businessman, is warned that his greed and exploitation of the poor are sealing his doom, wrapping him in ponderous chains made of the tools in trade of greedy landlords — "cashboxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel."

Many landlords today, if they only had eyes to see, might turn around and see an equally weighty and terrible chain of bad karma that they are forging. For those who place intolerable burdens on the backs of their tenants, and extort every last cent until their renters are penniless, and then evict them, the chains of karma must be a horrible burden, even if unseen.

Asked to make a charitable donation, Scrooge refuses, saying that the homeless must go to prisons and poorhouses. When told that many cannot go there and many others would rather die, he replies, "If they would rather die they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

Mary Jesus did precisely that. She could not bear the thought of prolonged homelessness, of shivering through cold December nights in alleys or being hopelessly exiled to shelters and Dickensian poorhouses. So she died and decreased the city's population of low-income renters.

Her death symbolizes the elimination of legions of poor people who have been evicted and have ended up homeless, or have been forced to move out of the city. Her violent death shocks our consciences and brings vividly to mind the fate of all the multitudes of those evicted and now homeless people that are so bitterly complained about by business owners and politicians, and criminalized by the police.

DEAD END STREET

In December 2004, the same month that Mary Jesus committed suicide, the National Low Income Housing Coalition released a report showing that California topped all states in the income needed to afford an apartment. This nationwide survey of rents found that a full-time worker making the federal minimum wage could not afford a one-bedroom apartment in 3,062 of the nation's 3,066 counties!

Mary Jesus, who was permanently disabled and living on G.A., made far less than the minimum wage. Losing her housing in the most expensive state in the nation was a life-threatening blow.

In the song "Dead End Street," Ray Davies, the masterful songwriter for The Kinks, described the gnawing desperation of poor tenants who feel pushed to the very brink of extinction by landlords:

"What are we living for?
Two-room apartment on the second floor.
No money coming in,
Rent collector's knocking, trying to get in.
We are strictly second-class,
We don't understand
Why we should be on dead end street.
People are living on dead end street
I'm gonna die on dead end street."

WEEP NO MORE, MY LADY

"Weep no more, my lady," as Judy Garland once sang so passionately. Mary Jesus has now escaped the pain and greed and injustices of this life. She is beyond tears now. We who still remain can weep for her, but that will never bring her back.

Only one thing would have saved her life: justice. Justice is hard to find in a nation ruled by the power of money and the unquestioned belief that the pursuit of profit is more sacred than the lives of human beings trampled down in the mad rush for more money.

Since homelessness has created so much suffering and so many premature deaths in the Bay Area, why are landlords permitted to engage in a frenzy of rental profiteering that leads directly to the loss of housing? Housing is not some commodity or luxury to be cynically exploited for maximum profit. It is a human necessity, necessary for the preservation of life and health. More than that that, housing is a human right, according to the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights.

A DREAM OF A MEMORIAL

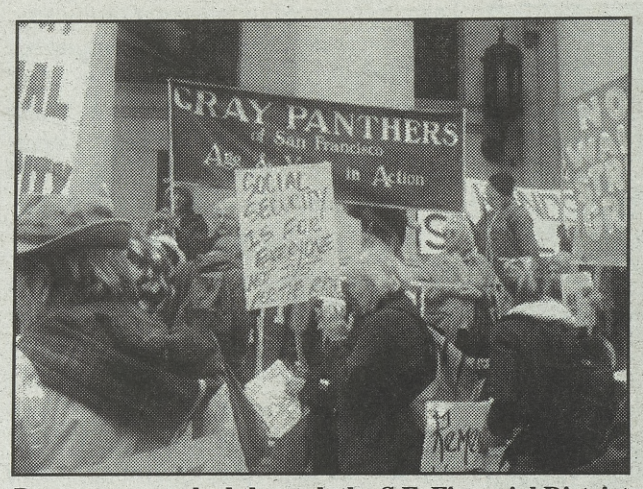
I dream of a memorial for Mary Jesus, a memorial that reminds the public about the suffering of all poor renters. Would a memorial show Mary in her flowing black clothes, her dark, cascading hair, her punk-rock fire and attitude and intelligence? Perhaps it would be a sculpture of her tiny figure atop the Tribune Tower, accompanied with a plaque showing her eviction notice and her last words: "The love of money is the root of all evil!"

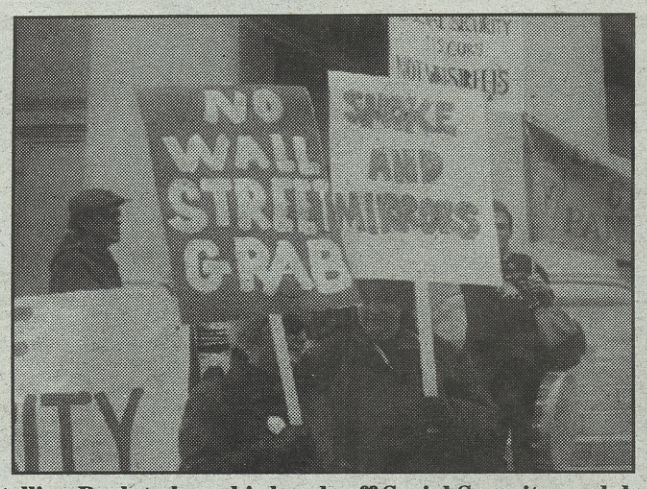
But no. The only memorial worthy of Mary's sacrifice is justice. Perhaps, in her name, the landlords could give up their assault on the Just Cause for Eviction law. Perhaps, before they raise the rents to unbearable levels, they could consider the human faces of tenants and their children, their lives and hopes and dreams.

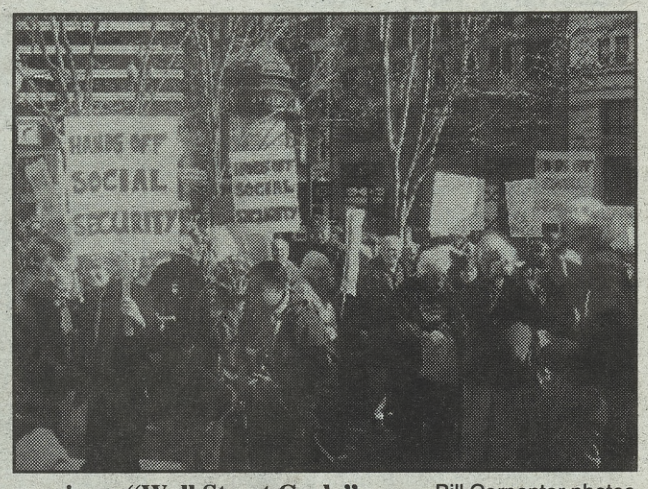
Perhaps they could remember that they hold the lives of renters in their hands when they make their cold calculations about real estate and profits and money.

Perhaps they could simply remember Mary Jesus, in life and in death.

The Scheme to Privatize Social Security







Protesters marched through the S.F. Financial District, telling Bush to keep his hands off Social Security, and denouncing a "Wall Street Grab." Bill Carpenter photos

by Lynda Carson

On January 11, the Bush administration held a large conference in Washington, D.C., to dupe the public into believing that Social Security is in a crisis and that only privatization of the program can solve this phony, manufactured crisis.

Before the glaring lights of the mainstream media, Bush declared, "As a matter of fact, by the time today's workers who are in their mid-20s begin to retire, the system will be bankrupt. So if you're 20 years old, in your mid-20s, and you're beginning to work, I want you to think about a Social Security system that will be flat bust, bankrupt, unless the United States Congress has got the willingness to act now."

Legislated by many acts of Congress, the fact remains that the Social Security system will not go "bankrupt" because it has no creditors. Legislated by law, the Social Security trustees are required to pay reduced benefits even if the trust fund becomes exhausted. The payroll taxes will continue to come in and the benefits shall continue to be paid to all recipients.

On January 13, Vice President Dick Cheney joined the chorus of liars when he claimed, "The system is on a course to eventual bankruptcy."

The dirty scheme to privatize Social Security is based on a pile of lies and deception, and everyone knows that this may end up being one of the worst scandals of the Republican Party. Handing Social Security over to corporate control will allow the profiteers of Wall Street an opportunity to fleece trillions of dollars from working-class Americans.

A memo spelling out the Bush strategy to privatize Social Security, written by Peter Wehner who works under Karl Rove in the White House, was leaked in early January 2005. Wehner wrote, "I don't need to tell you that this will be one of the most important conservative undertakings of modern times. If we succeed in reforming Social Security, it will rank as one of the most significant conservative governing achievements ever. The scope and scale of this endeavor are hard to overestimate.

"Let me tell you first what our plans are in terms of sequencing and political strategy. We will focus on Social Security immediately in this new year. Our strategy will probably include speeches early this month to establish an important premise: the current system is heading for an iceberg. The notion that younger workers will receive anything like the benefits they have been promised is fiction, unless significant reforms are undertaken. We need to establish in the public mind a key fiscal fact: right now we are on an unsustainable course. That reality needs to be seared into the public consciousness; it is the pre-condition to authentic reform."

In the leaked memo, Wehner goes on to state that, "For the first time in six decades, the Social Security battle is one we can win — and in doing so, we can help transform the political and philosophical landscape of the country."

In response to the Bush administration's phony Social Security crisis, Rep. Charles Rangel said, "But the facts prove that there is no imminent crisis with Social Security. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office says Social Security can pay full benefits for nearly 50 years. So, there is no crisis. But there is a challenge, because people are living longer. Unfortunately, the President's proposal for privatized accounts makes Social Security weaker, not stronger. It drains $2 trillion from the trust fund, leading to drastic cuts in benefits of more than 40 percent."

Opposition to Bush plan

Opposition is mounting to the efforts by Wall Street and the Bush administration to privatize Social Security. Major groups opposing the Bush plan are springing up all across the nation, including AARP, NAACP, National Organization for Women, major unions such as the AFL/CIO, Cal PERS (pension plan) of California, and the Gray Panthers.

The Bush administration has embarked upon a propaganda blitz to convince the American public that Social Security is *heading for an iceberg, and needs to be* privatized. Expected costs to privatize Social Security are around $2 trillion.

Yet there is no immediate crisis in the Social Security program. According to the Congressional Budget Office, if Social Security is left as is without any changes, it will be able to pay full benefits to all recipients until 2052, and about 80 percent of promised benefits beyond that.

By 2018, Social Security will begin paying out more each year than it receives in taxes annually, but this does not mean the program will collapse when this occurs. It must also be noted that by 2018 the Social Security Trust Fund should hold at least $5.3 trillion in U.S. Treasury Bills, which will allow the Trust Fund to grow by another 25 percent during the next decade due to the interest it earns on the Treasury Bills.

Social Security is a retirement program that started 70 years ago, in 1935. It was created as a direct result of the 1929 stock market crash and Great Depression that left millions of the elderly stranded in abject poverty. Social Security assists the elderly and disabled population with a meager benefits package that helps to overcome poverty, and the program also offers assistance to widows and children.

In an effort to convince the public that Social Security must be privatized, the White House and its wealthy corporate allies are using scare tactics to convince people that Social Security will collapse when the baby boomers retire.

The big lie is meant to dupe the younger generation into believing that Social Security cannot keep its promise to them, and that they would be better off by gambling away their Social Security funds with the profiteers on Wall Street.

The Bush scheme offers no guarantees to the younger generation beyond what is already being offered to them in the current system. The Bush administration is already demanding benefit cuts to all future recipients, and is trying to convince them that the stock market will make up the difference in lost benefits.

On January 16, the *New York Times* reported that the Bush administration directed the Social Security Administration (SSA) to gear up for a campaign to convince the public that a crisis exists with Social Security.

The Bush campaign created a rebellion within the ranks of SSA employees, who denounced the scheme for its planned use of huge amounts of Social Security Trust Fund dollars to promote a hoax on the American public. Within a day, the Bush administration declared that no one in the SSA would be forced to go along with their political agenda to sway public opinion into privatizing Social Security.

The Bush administration appears to be looking for a way to avoid paying back the $5.3 trillion that will be owed to the Social Security Trust Fund by 2018. Privatizing Social Security may be the ticket to avoid rolling back the multitrillion-dollar tax cuts for the wealthy that are actually needed to *cover huge budget deficits. There is no cri*sis in Social Security. The crisis is in the federal government, and unless tax cuts for the rich are rolled back, the federal government lacks the revenues needed to cover its national debt.

Protest in San Francisco

About 200 protesters hit the streets of San Francisco on January 18 to protest the Wall Street/Bush scheme to privatize Social Security. The demonstration began near the Pacific Coast Stock Exchange. The action was planned by members of five Bay Area Gray Panther chapters, Senior Action Network, Health Care for All, California Alliance for Retired Americans, S.F. Older Women's League, ANSWER, and the Million Worker March, and it was endorsed by the San Francisco Labor Council.

Michael Lyon of the S.F. Gray Panthers, one of the organizers, described the protest in an interview. He said, "About 200 people from around the Bay Area marched through San Francisco's Financial District on January 18, demanding that the government back off on its plans to (1) impose huge Social Security benefit cuts on future retirees; (2) divert trillions of dollars from Social Security into individual Wall Street accounts; and (3) not repay trillions of dollars of loans from the Social Security Trust Fund, using the money instead to replace money lost through tax cuts to the rich and war."

Angry chants echoed off the buildings of the Financial District: "No Privatization! No Gift to Wall Street!" "No benefit cuts, now or in the future! We won't sell out our kids!" "Hands off Social Security! It's ours, not Wall Street's!" "Stop the Lies! Social Security is NOT broken!"

A young man on a skateboard said he had not heard about the march, but he heard the marchers' chants from several blocks away. A lady with a walker had a sign reading "CRISIS, MY ASS!"

Marchers moved from location to location, chanting loudly.

Lyon said, "Decades of massive layoffs, wage reductions, speed-up, canceling pensions and health plans, safety violations, and evisceration of public services by legalized tax evasion are not enough. Now they want to take the money we put into the Social Security Trust Fund for our future, and use to solve the very problems they created: A huge budget deficit because of war and refusal of the rich to pay taxes, a huge trade deficit because they moved manufacturing abroad to pay low wages, and a falling dollar because foreign investors are losing confidence that the U.S. can continue to expand and are less willing to bankroll the U.S. Speakers declared that it was the biggest transfer of wealth from poor to rich in U.S. history."

The demonstrators' second stop was at the S.F. Chamber of Commerce. Lyon said, "The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is a major contributor to a corporate war chest to spread the lies that Social Security is bankrupt, and young workers must abandon Social Security to try to make their fortunes in the stock market. We demanded corporations and government stop the campaign of lies and intimidation to try to stampede us into abandoning Social Security, which has kept millions of seniors, disabled, and children of dead workers from poverty."

The marchers' last stop was in front of the offices of Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who was not able to greet them, since she was in Washington urging confirmation of Condoleezza Rice as Secretary of State.

Lyon said, "Though Sen. Feinstein says she is against privatization, no one trusts her because of her belief in means-testing, which would convert Social Security into an underfunded poverty program. Her support of the Medicare Prescription Privatization law was bad for seniors, because the benefits to the drug companies are far more expensive than keeping retirees and disabled out of poverty."

Social Security Now!, a local opposition group with members across the nation, has a Rolling Letter Campaign to send letters to editors of newspapers across the country. These letters of opposition to the efforts of Wall Street and the Bush administration to hand Social Security over to corporate control, have been published in *USA Today*, *Willets News*, *Independent Journal of Marin*, the *Berkeley Daily Planet*, *Anderson Valley Advertiser* and other media outlets.

Opposition member Jean Pauline said, "Dire predictions regarding future solvency of Social Security are based on inordinately pessimistic estimates of economic growth. Does it make any sense to try to prevent insolvency by retarding economic growth? Bush's proposed privatization will do just that by further increasing the deficit or raising taxes to pay the very high cost of any transition to this Wall Street scam."

Charles Kalish from San Francisco said,

See **Scheme to Privatize S.S.** *page 15*

Labor Needs A Radical Vision of Justice

Only a new, radical social vision can inspire the wave of commitment, idealism and activity necessary to rebuild the labor movement.

by David Bacon

For 40 years, AFL-CIO leaders George Meany and Lane Kirkland saw unorganized workers as a threat, when they saw them at all. They drove left-wing activists out of unions, and threw the message of solidarity on the scrapheap.

Labor's dinosaurs treated unions as a business, representing members in exchange for dues, while ignoring the needs of workers as a whole.

A decade ago, new leaders were thrust into office in the AFL-CIO — a product of the crisis of falling union density, weakened political power, and a generation of angry labor activists demanding a change in direction. Those ten years have yielded important gains for unions.

Big efforts were made to organize — strawberry workers in Watsonville, asbestos workers in New York and New Jersey, poultry and meatpacking workers in the South, and healthcare workers throughout the country. Yet in only one year was the pace of organizing fast enough to keep union density from falling.

Other gains were made in winning more progressive policies on immigration, and in some areas, relations with workers in other countries. Yet here also, progress has not been fast enough.

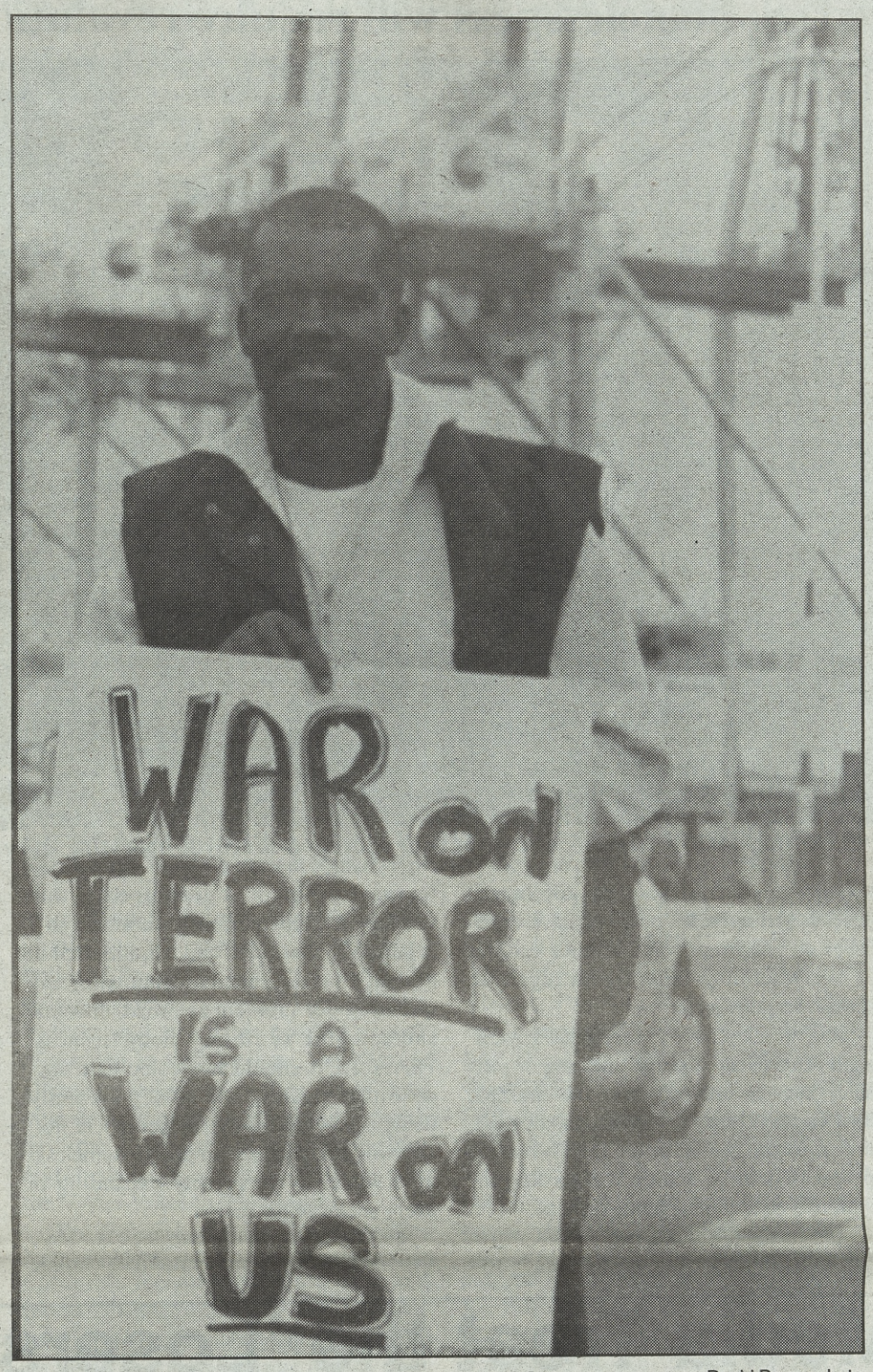
Corporations and the government policies that serve them have presented new dangers even greater than those faced a decade ago.

The set of proposals made by SEIU, and now by other unions from CWA to the Teamsters, are a positive response to this crisis. They've started a debate labor desperately needs. And they all put the issue of stopping the slide in members and power — the problem of organizing — at center stage where it belongs.

Organizing large numbers of workers will not just help unions. Wages rise under the pressure of union drives, especially among non-union workers. Stronger unions will force politicians to recognize universal healthcare, secure jobs, and free education after high school, not as pie-in-the-sky dreams, but as the legitimate demands of millions of people.

But the AFL-CIO has a huge job. Raising the percentage of organized workers in the United States from just 10 to 11 percent would mean organizing over a million people. Only a social movement can organize people on this scale.

In addition to examining structural reforms that can make unions more effective and concentrate their power, the labor movement needs a program which can inspire people to organize on their own, one which is unafraid to put forward radical demands, and rejects the constant argument that any proposal that can't get through Congress next year is not worth fighting for.



A worker warns that the war on terror harms the labor movement. David Bacon photo

Stronger unions will force politicians to recognize universal healthcare, secure jobs, and free education after high school, not as pie-in-the-sky dreams, but as the legitimate demands of millions of people.

As much as people need a raise, the promise of one is not enough to inspire them to face the certain dangers they know too well await them. Working families need the promise of a better world.

Over and over, for more than a century, workers have shown that they will struggle for the future of their children and their communities, even when their own future seems in doubt. But only a new, radical social vision can inspire the wave of commitment, idealism and activity necessary to rebuild the labor movement.

Organizing a union is a right, but it only exists on paper. Violating a worker's right to organize should be punished with the same severity used to protect property rights. Fire a worker for joining a union — go to jail.

Today, instead, workers get fired in a third of all organizing drives. Companies close and abandon whole communities, and threaten to do so even more often. Strikebreaking and union busting have become acceptable corporate behavior. There are no effective penalties for companies that violate labor rights, and most workers know this.

In addition, there are new weapons in the anti-union arsenal, such as modern-day company unions. Chronic unemployment, and social policies like welfare reform, pit workers against each other in vicious competition, undermining the unity they need to organize.

Millions of workers are desperate because they have lost jobs, or are in danger of losing them. Employers move factories and downsize their workforce to boost stock prices. The government cuts social benefits while driving welfare recipients into a job market already glutted with millions of people who can't find work.

Without speaking directly to workers' desperation and fear of unemployment, unions will never convince millions to organize, and risk the jobs they still have.

Government and corporations may treat a job as a privilege, and a vanishing one at that, but unions must defend a job as a right. And to protect that right, workers need laws which prohibit capital flight, and which give them a large amount of control over corporate investment. In the meantime, organizing unemployed people should be as important as organizing in the workplace.

Since grinding poverty in much of the world is an incentive for moving production, defending the standard of living of workers around the world is as necessary as defending our own. The logic of inclusion in a global labor movement must apply as much to a worker in Bangladesh as it does to the non-union worker down the street.

While the percentage of organized workers has declined every year for the past decade, unions have made important progress in finding alternative strategic ideas to the old business unionism of Meany and Kirkland. If these ideas are developed and extended, they provide an important base for making unions stronger and embedding them more deeply in working-class communities.

The two proposals at the end of SEIU's ten points begin to address these strategic ideas, but they fall short of providing a new direction. They are the proposals on diversity, or civil rights, and on building a global labor movement.

Labor's change on immigration policy was a watershed development which put unions on the side of immigrants, rather than against them. The change provided the basis for an alliance between labor and immigrant communities based on mutual interest, and asked union members, and workers in general, to fight for a society based on inclusion, rather than exclusion.

But this policy was usually implemented to win support for union organizing campaigns, and only rarely to defend immigrant communities as they were attacked in the post-911 hysteria.

When 40,000 airport screeners lost their jobs because of their citizenship status, there was hardly any labor outcry or

See **Labor Needs Radical Vision** *page 15*

the reappearance of marie antoinette

by Randy Fingland

the wonders in the numbers
of folks who remember
the dismissal of charity's place
with *let them eat cakes*
to the french press
attending her husband's court
overthrown by the revolution
extended to new heights
of hunger
these many centuries later
because certainly
there's insufficient bread
to go around now
and once again
such a deficit's acceptable.

Subscribe to Street Spirit!

Street Spirit is published by the **American Friends Service Committee.** Homeless vendors receive 50 papers a day for free, earn income and self-reliance, and educate the community about social justice issues. American Friends Service Committee shoulders the entire printing costs of more than $3,000.00 each month to give our vendors a job providing a positive alternative to panhandling. Please **donate** or **subscribe** to ***Street Spirit*** ! Help us remain an independent voice for justice!

❒ **I enclose $25 for one year's subscription.**
❒ **I enclose a donation of ❒ $100 ❒ $50 ❒ $ 25**

February 2005

Send Donations to:
Street Spirit, AFSC
1515 Webster St., Suite 303
Oakland, CA 94612

Name: _____
Address: _____
City: _____ **State:**_____ **Zip:** _____

U.S. Government Officials Have No Solutions to Poverty

Eliminating chronic U.S. homelessness will require revolutionary reforms

by Robert L. Terrell

Sooner or later, a critical mass of the U.S. populace will come to understand that chronic homelessness is a virulently dangerous social cancer that must be eliminated.

In the interim, everyone needs to understand that building the coalition necessary for accomplishing the task of eliminating homelessness will not prove easy. This is due to numerous factors, not the least of them being tradition, graft, ignorance, insufficient courage and inadequate imagination.

Furthermore, it should be understood that chronic homelessness is such a complicated problem that it cannot be eliminated without the implementation of comprehensive reforms that have revolutionary ramifications.

If the problem is to be eliminated, much more attention will need to be devoted to matters such as child rearing, healthcare, education, job training and substantial revisions in the nation's dated, tattered, poorly understood and abysmally administered social contract.

More attention will also need to be devoted to the relationship between people and government. This is so for at least two reasons. The first is the fact that the current relationship between people and government regarding serious, endemic social problems such as chronic homelessness engenders too much uncritical passivity by citizens.

As a result, in far too many communities around the nation, government officials are provided too much unchecked, unmonitored, uncoordinated, unsuccessful authority to manage chronic homelessness. This is the case despite the fact that, in the vast majority of circumstances, the government officials and agencies involved have established an unbroken record of three decades of overwhelming failure with regard to chronic homelessness.



"Please Help Me." A woman's sign seems to be addressed directly to unhearing and uncaring politicians. Robert Terrell photo

One does not have to assert that government officials are corrupt, uncaring or seriously inept in order to make the case that their current efforts are failing, and that radical reforms are in order if substantive progress is to be achieved regarding the elimination of chronic homelessness.

The key point to be understood where this particular aspect of the chronic homelessness problem is concerned is that much of the apparatus of government as it is currently structured and administered in this nation is not suited to eliminating any serious social problem as broad, endemic and complex as chronic homelessness. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that much of the money currently being spent on homeless people is not, and will not, produce an end to homelessness, which is inexorably expanding in every sector of the nation.

The federal government does not have a comprehensive plan to eliminate chronic homelessness, and neither do the states and major municipalities. At best, the plans currently in use are intended to service the problem. Few if any such plans go upstream, as it were, to address in a comprehensive manner the fundamental sources of homelessness.

Moreover, there are no notable plans afoot that require county, municipal, state and national units of government tasked with addressing chronic homelessness to coordinate their efforts via a Comprehensive National Master Plan.

See **U.S. Government Officials** *page 16*

Corporate Media Treat the 'Losers' Like Dirt

by Norman Solomon

A system glorifies its winners. The mass media and the rest of corporate America are enthralled with professionals scaling career ladders to new heights. Meanwhile, the people hanging onto bottom rungs are scarcely blips on screens.

Far from the media spotlights are countless lives beset with financial scarcity, often in tandem with chronic illness, monotony, adversity and despair. The same institutions and attitudes that lavish outsized respect on high achievers (the wealthier the better) are apt to convey ongoing disrespect for low achievers.

The flip side of adulation for winners is often contempt for people with cumulative misfortune, who routinely slog through murky quasi-netherworlds and do their best to keep from going under. According to mass-media calculations, they just don't rate. In a society overdosing on unmitigated capitalism, it's not just a matter of scant disposable income. As a practical matter, the country treats many people as disposable.

When personal dreams of success or even equilibrium sink below horizons, the same media outlets that laud the successful have little use for those defined by the system as abject failures. For mainstream media, the plentiful underachievers are customarily the rough equivalent of flotsam and jetsam.

The downwardly un-mobile may pump gas, wash dishes, trim hedges or do any number of other low-pay, no-benefit jobs. They might rent a tiny rundown apartment, sleep in charity shelters or bed down on urban cement; they may wait in emergency rooms or clinics, merely shaking their heads at the immediate question that prompts most Americans to show medical-insurance cards.



Homeless people often are ignored or maligned by the mass media. Robert Terrell photo

In a society overdosing on unmitigated capitalism, it's not just a matter of scant disposable income. As a practical matter, the country treats many people as disposable.

In human terms, they may be the salt of the earth, but the corporate-driven system commonly treats them like dirt. And for many of those who've been on a downward spiral for a long time, there's not the slightest whiff of a happy ending. Media disdain for such lives is most vehemently expressed by ignoring them; in the routine calculus of the newsroom, nonpersons get non-coverage.

If you see the new movie "The Assassination of Richard Nixon," you might feel compelled to think again about such matters — and maybe in a new way. Inspired by a real person named Samuel Byck who went through a personal meltdown 30 years ago, this stunning film makes more difficult our usual psychological evasions about people whose failures include an inability to pull themselves out of tailspins.

You may never see a more powerful performance on a screen than the one in this movie by Sean Penn. (Full disclosure: He's a friend agree with *Newsday* reviewer Jan Stuart, who wrote that the film is "a triumph for its star and the writers, who make us cringe with empathy for a man who taps into the latent loser in all of us."

It isn't just that we would rather not contemplate the dire circumstances of others. We also would prefer not to look too closely at the thin ice that is underfoot for us all. Even the most secure have no guarantees of health, stability or longevity.

While reviews across the country are almost unanimous with praise for Sean Penn's superb acting in "The Assassination of Richard Nixon," their reactions to the overall film have ranged from acclaim to indifference. The discomfort of some reviewers seems to be intertwined with wariness about the movie's great empathy for someone who can't win.

The marriage that the film's main character desperately wants to glue back together has cracked up beyond repair. The political economy that he hopes will welcome and reward his honest work has no use for him. All the outward signposts tell us that he's headed toward the system's destination for what it treats as expendable — the equivalent of corporate road kill. And his mental deterioration leads him to engage in terrible violence.

Director Niels Mueller, who co-wrote "The Assassination of Richard Nixon" with Kevin Kennedy, has brought to the screen a work of creativity that finds politics in humanity. Given its acute sensibilities, the film is remarkable enough to represent a bit of a cinematic miracle.

Maybe fuller realization of vulnerabilities that are inherent in the human condition — and exacerbated by predatory social orders — can bring more genuine humility and deeper compassion.

Norman Solomon's next book, *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*, will be published in early summer by Wiley.

When They Get Behind Closed Doors...

Alameda County Housing Authority director supports Bush administration's attack on Section 8 Program in a closed-door meeting of the National Housing Conference

by Lynda Carson

During a closed-door meeting on January 12, Alameda County Housing Authority Executive Director Ophelia Basgal shocked a number of members from the National Housing Conference (NHC), when she expressed her acceptance of the Bush administration's plan to gut the Section 8 program. Basgal acted as though the draconian cutbacks were already a done deal, and everyone may as well accept it, said one of the shocked NHC members present at the meeting.

Acting as a shill for the Bush administration's scheme to gut Section 8, Housing Authority Director Basgal said that the Section 8 program needs to be reformed. Basgal pointed to the city of Chicago as an example of problems in the program, as she tried to convince a room of 30 NHC members that the Section 8 budget is so out of control that fraud is rampant. Basgal made it clear to the group at the NHC conference that she supports the Bush administration's efforts to cut Section 8, and is vigorously looking for ways to meet those goals as soon as possible.

Those goals may include taking away housing vouchers from the poorest of the poor and handing them over to wealthier tenants. Another goal would be to set time limits on how long families or tenants may use housing vouchers, no matter how desperate their housing situation may be. Still another goal would be to fully use Bush's proposed Flexible Voucher Program, a proposal that has already been rejected, condemned and denounced by housing activists across the country as being inhumane to low-income families.

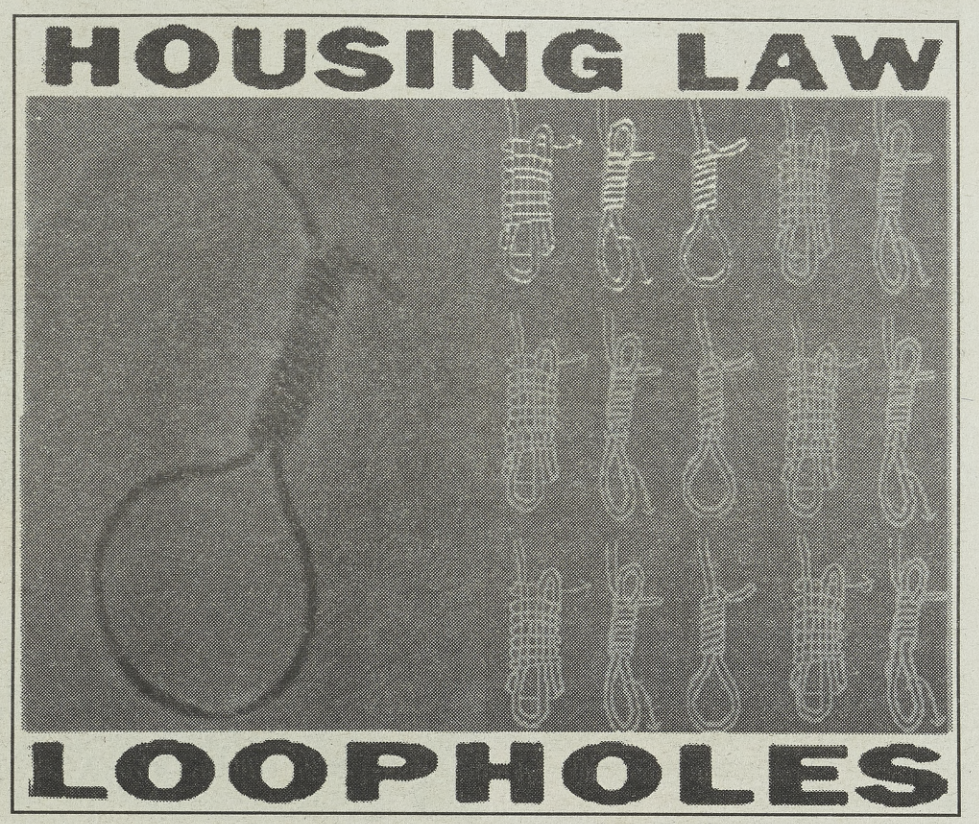
Lucinda Rosman, a Section 8 activist of Alameda, was horrified to hear of Basgal's statements at the NHC conference, held in Walnut Creek on January 12.

Rosman said, "As a housing authority director, Ophelia Basgal should know better than to support the Bush administration's schemes to hurt low-income families in the Section 8 program. We just had a housing disaster in the city of Alameda recently due to budget cuts in the program, and some of those tenants may have transferred to become Section 8 tenants in Alameda County as a result. Let's not see them get hurt again.

"She should not take vouchers away from the poorest tenants to give to wealthier tenants, because that is not what the Section 8 program is all about, and it would be an immoral act to do so. Some 80 percent of the people in the Section 8 program have no means to pay their rents if time limits threaten their housing, and Ophelia Basgal is fully aware of this."

This latest development does not bode well for Section 8 tenants in Alameda County, who depend on the director of the housing authority to know the difference between right and wrong. HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson and the Bush administration have come under fire during the past year for their efforts to gut the Section 8 program; and Section 8 tenants in Alameda County are not well served by a housing director who supports draconian policies that have already harmed tens of thousands of families across the nation.

The Alameda County Housing Authority, located in Hayward, administers about 5,562 Section 8 housing units, as well as 232 units of public housing.



A poster by the S.F. Print Collective shows that when government officials create loopholes in housing laws designed to protect the poor, the results are deadly.

NATIONAL HOUSING CONFERENCE

The National Housing Conference, headed by President and CEO Conrad Egan, is a national coalition dedicated to supporting affordable housing, and is comprised of housing developers, builders, investors, architects, residents, religious leaders, state and local officials, bankers, and affordable housing experts. According to their website, the National Housing Conference "believes that every American, regardless of income, should have the opportunity to live in a suitable neighborhood. Since 1931, NHC has been the United Voice for Housing."

The National Housing Conference has held several regional meetings in California recently to discuss numerous issues related to housing and development, including a meeting in Los Angeles on January 11 at The Regency Club, and a second meeting at the PMI Plaza in Walnut Creek on January 12.

According to an inside source present at the Walnut Creek meeting, about 30 members, mostly directors of housing-related companies and organizations, showed up for the one-day affair, including Ophelia Basgal of the Alameda County Housing Authority.

Those attending joined together in the large conference room, where four long tables were set up in a square, and members were allowed to speak freely about the agenda items of their concern. The Section 8 issue was only one of the items on the agenda for that day.

Priori to this meeting, in a December 8th memo from NHC President Conrad Egan to its members, the topic of Section 8 was framed by asking: Is there a better way to provide federal housing assistance?

The memo asks: "What improvements in the federal housing assistance system are necessary to maintain and increase resource levels for very and extremely low-income beneficiaries, including time limits, greater income eligibility ranges, increased flexibility, all while preserving program intent and integrity?"

The January 12th NHC regional meeting in Walnut Creek was set up to discuss the virtues of dismantling the existing Section 8 protections for low-income renters. Discussions of time limits for voucher holders, greater income eligibility ranges, and increased flexibility are all euphemisms being used to discuss the destruction of the existing Section 8 program to make way for a new program that would cater to a whole new group of higher-income renters.

When the subject of Section 8 housing came up at the NHC conference in Walnut Creek, a number of NHC members spoke out in opposition to the proposed Flexible Voucher Program. Some members repeatedly asked NHC Director Conrad Egan to take a stand and speak out in opposition to the gutting of the Section 8 program by HUD and the Bush administration. Some NHC members responded positively when Julie Spezia of Housing California spoke out passionately in opposition to the proposed cuts in the Section 8 program.

Egan steadfastly ducked and sidestepped all requests to oppose HUD and the Bush administration, and declined to state that he and the NHC oppose Bush's proposed Flexible Voucher Program or any other cuts to the program. Egan also warned NHC members that what is said in this room, needs to stay in this room.

Many members of the NHC regional meeting were extremely disappointed that NHC President Egan declined to take a stand in opposition to the proposed cuts to Section 8. Many believe that the full weight of the NHC would make a difference in the struggle to save low-income renters from the Flexible Voucher Program.

According to an inside source present at the meeting, Egan told the NHC members to focus on lobbying the Republicans, and to forget about the Democrats who already oppose the Bush position to gut the Section 8 program. The NHC members then agreed to lobby Rep. Jerry Lewis (Republican House member from Southern California), in an effort to stop proposed funding cuts to Section 8. Rep. Lewis was selected in early January 2005 as the Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee.

According to inside sources at the meeting, those attending the NHC conference in Walnut Creek included: Ophelia Basgal, Alameda County Housing Authority; Leslye Corsiglia and Michael Meyer, San Jose Department of Housing; Julie Spezia, executive director of Housing California; Liz Orlin, Corporation for Supportive Housing; Janet Falk, Mercy Housing; Betty Pagett of EAH in Marin County; Linda Wheaton, State Department of Housing and Community Development; several members of HUD's regional office; and a host of directors of housing organizations and lending institutions in Northern California.

Section 8 families across the country are alarmed by the secrecy of the NHC and other housing officials holding secret meetings behind closed doors that are meant to keep them in the dark.

The nearly 2 million families in the Section 8 program want these housing directors to stand up in opposition to the proposed cuts in the nation's housing programs, and have been outraged at being double-crossed by HUD and the Bush administration recently when their Section 8 contracts were sabotaged all across the nation.

The regional directors of HUD and the directors of some of these sanctimonious housing organizations have made a very comfortable living for themselves from the Section 8 program; yet they are now selling out their low-income tenants to the aggressive, anti-poor policies of the Bush administration.

Many directors of housing organizations and housing authorities make $100,000 or more a year from exploiting the Section 8 program, and if the Bush administration wants them to dump the poor out of their housing in exchange for higher-income renters, it's no sweat to them. Their salaries all remain the same, as long as they follow orders to dump the poor out of their housing. Some may even receive an extra bonus if they can make the poor homeless at an ever faster pace than the Bush administration requires.

The directors of the nation's housing authorities and affordable housing agencies have a responsibility to stand on their own two feet in opposition to the Bush administration's attacks on the poor. Specifically, NHC President Egan has a duty to make a public statement telling the low-income renters of America that the NHC fully supports them and condemns *the proposed Flexible Voucher Program* in any way, shape or form.

The fate of America's low-income renters rests in the hands of the housing authorities and housing organizations that have profited handsomely from the Section 8 program these past 30 years. At this point, the low-income renters in the Section 8 program are very concerned about their future.

Lynda Carson may be reached at (510) 763-1085 or TenantsRule@yahoo.com

Tsunami

by Edvino Ugolini

Nature has swept away
For a moment
The indifference of the people
Towards the destiny
Of their brothers.
We must rebuild this moment
And create endless chains of solidarity
From the remote village
Until the suburbs of the cities
Where too many people are suffering
In front of those who
Run away to ignore all that.
The mosaic of suffering
On the path of those
Who sowed death and injustice
Has to be recomposed
And from every tear
Must spring up
A bud of hope for a new world.

Who Scares Who?

by Andy Block

You wear on your sleeve
your disdain for me.
When we pass on the street
we do not meet or greet.
Instead, I see eyes downcast and sneers,
Snickering, and fear.

King's Dream Included Decent Wages for All

by Holly Sklar

Did you know that raising the minimum wage was a demand of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech?

King, A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and other leaders of the 1963 March on Washington demanded "a national minimum wage act that will give all Americans a decent standard of living."

They didn't dream that four decades later, the value of the minimum wage would go down as the cost of housing, food, health care and other necessities went up.

They didn't dream that four decades later, 36 million Americans would be below the official poverty line — far below a decent standard of living.

They didn't dream that four decades later, the black poverty rate would still be triple that of whites.

At the time of the march in 1963, the minimum wage was $7.80 an hour, adjusting for inflation in 2004 dollars. Today's minimum wage is far lower — just $5.15 an hour.

In *Where Do We Go From Here?*, King wrote, "There is nothing but a lack of social vision to prevent us from paying an adequate wage to every American citizen whether he be a hospital worker, laundry worker, maid, or day laborer."

The minimum wage reached its peak value in 1968, the year King was assassinated. Today's $5.15 minimum wage is 41 percent less than 1968's inflation-adjusted minimum wage of $8.78.

Full-time, year-round, minimum-wage workers made $18,262 in 1968, adjusting for inflation. Today's full-time minimum-wage workers make just $10,712 a year.

The minimum wage sets the wage floor. As the floor sinks, millions of workers find themselves with wages above the minimum, but not above the poverty level.

Business Week observed last year in a cover story on the working poor, "Today more than 28 million people, about a quarter of the workforce between the ages of 18 and 64, earn less than $9.04 an hour, which translates into a full-time salary of $18,800 a year — the income that marks the federal poverty line for a family of four."

One out of three black workers earns less than $9.04 an hour — barely above the value of the minimum wage of 1968.

Certainly, King didn't dream that four decades after the March on Washington, the U.S. Conference of Mayors would find in its annual "Hunger and Homelessness Survey" that 17 percent of the homeless were employed, as were 34 percent of adults requesting emergency food assistance.

The last minimum wage increases in 1996-97 were followed by rising incomes and falling poverty and unemployment nationwide. We need another boost to the minimum wage, and the economy.

Most Americans believe a job should keep you out of poverty, not keep you in it. Most Americans want to raise the minimum wage significantly.

Yet Congress has had seven pay raises since 1997, when the minimum wage increased to $5.15, while approving none for minimum-wage workers. This month, congressional pay rose to $162,100 — way up from $133,600 in 1997. That cumulative $28,500 congressional pay hike is more than the total earnings of two minimum-wage workers.



"Fight the right." **Young people marched in honor of Martin Luther King's legacy in San Francisco on January 17.** Anna Graves photo

At the time of the 1963 March on Washington, members of Congress earned nine times the pay of minimum-wage workers. Now, they earn 15 times as much. To reverse that growing gap, Congress should tie their pay raises to raises in the minimum wage.

Georgia Congressman John Lewis, a leader of the March on Washington, has said if King were alive, "he would be in the forefront of reminding the government that its first concern should be the basic needs of its citizens — not just black Americans but all Americans — for food, shelter, health care, education, jobs, livable incomes and the opportunity to realize their full potential."

A. Philip Randolph introduced King before the "I Have a Dream" speech as "the moral leader of America."

Congress and the White House should stop taking a holiday from King's dream and enact "a national minimum wage act that will give all Americans a decent standard of living."

Holly Sklar is co-author of *Raise the Floor: Wages and Policies That Work for All Of Us* (www.raisethefloor.org). She can be reached at hsklar@aol.com. Copyright 2005 Holly Sklar.

What Would MLK Do?

by Mara Voukydis

Last year around this time, as throngs of protesters chanted and booed on the streets nearby, President Bush placed a wreath on Dr. King's grave in Atlanta. The president had said of King earlier that day that he wanted to "honor his life and what he stood for." Now, as we usher in President Bush for a second term in office, it's time to ask whether he has lived up to Dr. King's legacy. On Bush's watch, working people and poor people — disproportionately people of color — lost ground.

"Every American deserves to be an owner of the American dream," said Bush, but a great racial divide remains. If Bush wants to make this a nation where we can all be owners, he should be asking, "What would Martin Luther King do?"

What does it take to be an owner of the American dream? A house comes to mind, and a savings account, and a retirement account, maybe a business — and those things are usually accessible only to those with well-paying jobs, help from family and/or government subsidies. Yet, for generations, people of color have been afforded fewer opportunities to own, blocked by discriminatory practices in housing, loans, hiring, and more.

Decades ago, King spoke of millions of Americans "smoldering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society." This still rings true in 2005.

In the past four years, some gains made in the 1990s have been lost. In 2000, the Black unemployment rate dipped to an all-time low of 7 percent. Now, more than one out of 10 Black Americans is unemployed, as compared to roughly one out of 20 whites. The familiar call for personal responsibility loses its momentum when a person tries desperately and is unable to find work.

Income levels and poverty rates also have worsened since 2000. The number of families in poverty fell rapidly during the 1990s for all groups, but especially fast for Latinos and Blacks. Much of that progress has been lost in the past four years. As for earnings, the average Black income was 65 percent of white income in the year 2000, but 62 percent of white income in 2003. The first Bush administration blocked Congressional efforts to increase the minimum wage.

Many measures taken by other administrations to counter high joblessness, such as public works programs and extra state aid, didn't reappear in the Bush administration. Instead, tax cuts were supposed to be the cure-all. In fact, they only increased the racial divide by benefiting primarily taxpayers with very high incomes, who are overwhelmingly white.

Social Security privatization is another so-called solution that would actually worsen economic insecurity by lowering benefits, adding risk, and ballooning the federal debt.

Refreshingly, Bush has faced up to the racial homeownership gap, addressing certain challenges facing non-white Americans. It is hard to ignore the fact that while three-quarters of white families own homes, fewer than half of Blacks and Latinos, and less than 60 percent of Asians and American Indians, are homeowners.

See **What Would MLK Do?** *page 14*

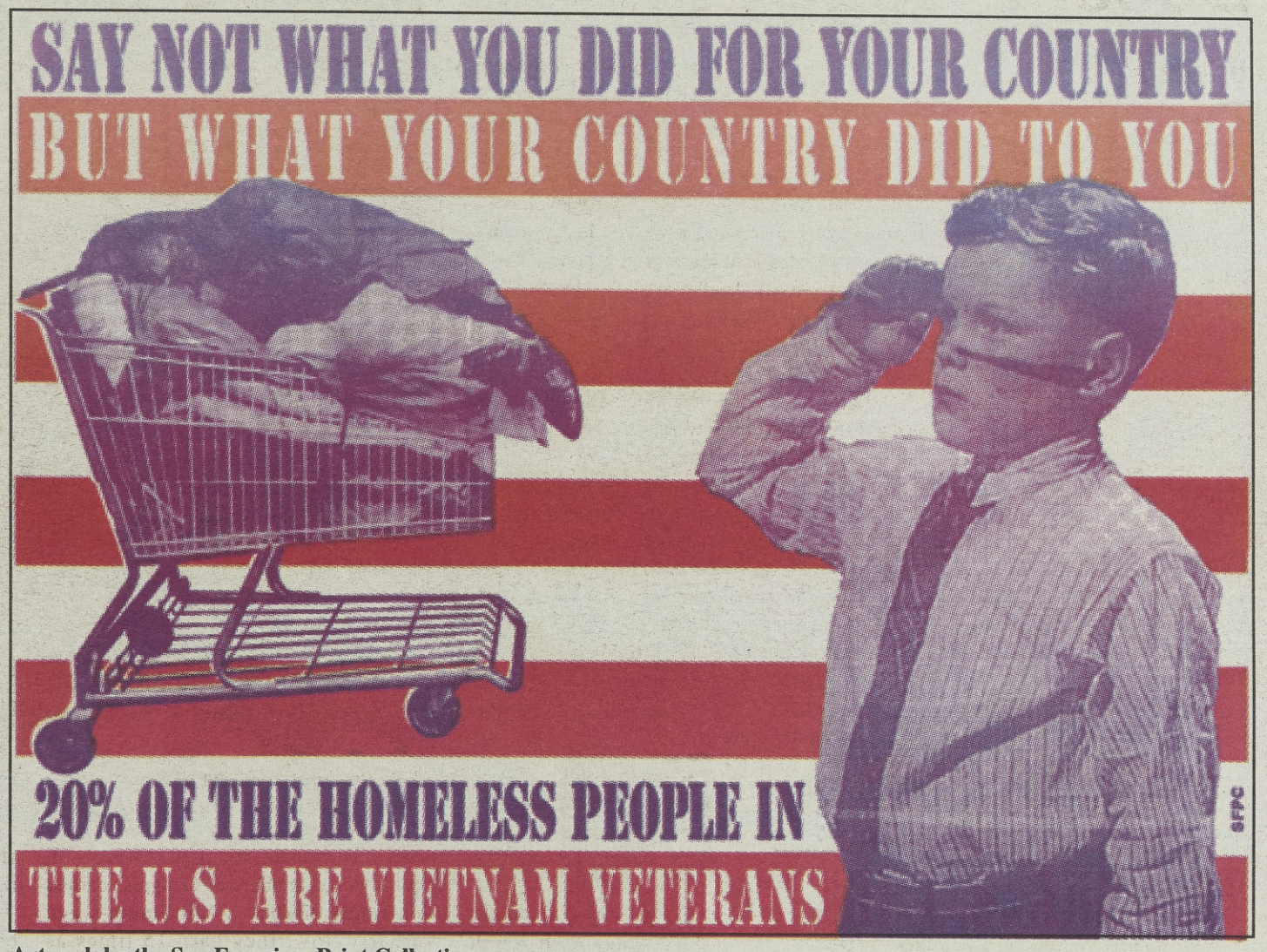


A young child holds her African-American doll at the annual rally to honor Martin Luther King's legacy in San Francisco. Anna Graves photo

The Least, the Last, and the Lost

George W. Bush's record on homelessness and homeless policy in America

by Becky Johnson



Artwork by the San Francisco Print Collective

On January 20, 2005, President George W. Bush took the oath of office for his second term. The theme of his inaugural speech was freedom. Freedom from tyranny. Freedom from oppression. Freedom from want. Freedom from government interference.

Kirbyjon Caldwell, pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston, took the podium and read the benediction which included a blessing for "The Least, the Last, and the Lost."

Who are the least of Americans, if not homeless people? They are refugees in their own land. How has the first four years of the Bush administration affected homeless people?

According to the Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy, after examining recent information from the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 34.9 million people in the United States who go hungry or are food insecure — an increase of 3.9 million people since 1999.

About 3.5 million people in the United States are homeless, 39 percent of whom are children. Families with children are among the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population.

The National Coalition for the Homeless conducted a survey of cities across the nation this past year and found that "100 percent of communities surveyed lack enough shelter beds to meet demand and housing costs are out of reach for many, including the working poor."

One in seven Americans — a total of 45 million people, including 8.4 million children — lack health insurance. In addition, the cost of the ten most-used prescription drugs has increased nearly 9 percent in 2003, outpacing inflation.

More than 1 in 10 Americans live in poverty.

BUSH'S HOMELESS POLICIES

During his campaign for a second term, George W. Bush claimed that it is not the role of government to provide food, shelter, and health care. Instead, he sai,d we are to rely on the Armies of Compassion to come forward and provide those kinds of services.

Government subsidies to offset homelessness have been waning. When the Section 8 program was created in 1976, 400,000 vouchers were provided, allowing families to spend less than 30 percent of their income on rent. By 2003 a mere 34,000 new vouchers were provided to families.

And President Bush plans even more cuts. Bush's 2005 budget would cut $1.6 billion from the Section 8 voucher program, potentially edging 250,000 households out of the program — 12.5 percent of those currently participating.

BUSH AND POVERTY IN AMERICA

In the United States, 35.8 million people — 12.5 percent of the population — live below the federal poverty line. An estimated 4.3 million people slipped into poverty between 2000 and 2003. Currently, 12.9 million children live in poverty.

For welfare moms, Bush is seeking reauthorization of the 1996 Welfare Reform law, making this law even more hard-edged and punitive by adding new provisions which would no longer count education as a work activity, and increasing the required number of work hours per week to 40. As usual, the "work" of caring for her own children doesn't count in the Bush administration.

In 2006, the Bush administration plans to cut $177 million from the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition program — forcing an estimated 187,287 mothers out of the program.

The National Coalition for the Homeless conducted a survey of cities across the nation this past year and found that "100 percent of communities surveyed lack enough shelter beds to meet demand and housing costs are out of reach for many, including the working poor."

Does Section 8 funding really help people stay out of homelessness? Six national homeless organizations agree that a study of homeless families who received Section 8 housing assistance in nine cities found that over 85 percent of beneficiaries remained permanently housed 18 months later. Even homeless people with serious mental illnesses, who experience the most complex social and medical circumstances, can succeed.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors reported that in the last year, requests for emergency food assistance increased by an average of 17 percent and requests for emergency shelter assistance have increased by an average of 13 percent in the 25 cities surveyed.

The Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism reports that the root causes of homelessness are unemployment and low-paying jobs, coupled with high housing costs.

The Bush administration would have us believe that personal responsibility is the cause of homelessness. The claim is that homeless people become homeless because they made a bad decision at some point in their life, such as quitting school or quitting a job. But if that's true, then people in the United States steadily have been becoming more and more irresponsible since 1980.

RELIGION AND HOMELESSNESS

President Bush claims that he is guided by his faith in God. What do the major religions teach about taking care of the poor and homeless?

Christianity teaches us that wealth is not what you need to enter heaven. To enter heaven, you must be caring and share your riches with the poor and needy.

Jewish tradition teaches us to "speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy" (Proverbs 31:19). God commands us to "share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into your house" (Isaiah 58:7).

Islam teaches both charity and the responsibility for caring for one's own family members. One of Allah's blessings and a solution for economic disparity is the institution of Zakaat. Zakaat is a tax on the wealth of a Muslim which is distributed to the poor.

Allah says in the Holy Qur'an: "Take alms out of their wealth, so that thou mayest cleanse them and purify them thereby" (9:103). Thus Islam has made the giving of charity a purification for those with wealth and a means by which the wealthy may achieve nearness to Allah.

COST OF CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

"Einstein said a sure sign of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and hoping something different will happen," said Philip Mangano, President Bush's point man on homelessness, as he visited the Barbers Point Homeless Veterans Program at Kalaeloa, Hawaii.

In 2002, Bush appointed Mangano as executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, which coordinates the efforts of 20 government agencies. Mangano claims the president has spent more money on homelessness than any president in history.

Mangano reported that there are a disproportionate number of homeless veterans. He noted that one out of every four people who come out of prison has no place to go.

"Studies around the country have shown that it's more expensive to leave chronic homeless people out on the streets than it is to house them and provide the services they need," he said.

Mangano cited a study by the University of California at San Diego in the late 1990s that followed 15 chronic street people for 18 months. By the end of that time, the subjects had accumulated hundreds of trips to emergency wards in ambulances accompanied by emergency medical technicians in order to spend multiple days in the hospital.

"Factoring in police interventions and periods of incarceration," Mangano said, "researchers concluded the 15 homeless people cost the city of San Diego $3 million. It was $200,000 per person.

"So what they thought was, 'Wait a minute — we could have placed these people in rented oceanside condos and provided all the services and servants they needed and it would have been less expensive.'

"But what aggravated them the most was, after spending $3 million in 18 months for 15 people, the homeless people were in the same position as they were at the start."

In 2002, the Bush administration launched an initiative to end chronic homelessness in 10 years. The National Coalition for the Homeless argued about the Bush initiative in a 2003 report: "Perhaps most troubling, is the complete absence of any discussion of poverty and the affordable housing crisis that underlie homelessness for all populations."

A PLAN TO END HOMELESSNESS

No plan to end homelessness could be effective without dedicating significant resources towards affordable housing production.

Those compassionate conservatives ought to take a look at the Bringing America Home Act, which was designed to comprehensively address homelessness by addressing the affordable housing crisis, inadequate access to health care, and the lack of livable incomes, while calling on localities to stop passing ordinances that criminalize the homeless. Funding for transitional housing for victims of domestic violence is included in the bill.

A Disconnect Between the Protesters and the Poor

Poor, homeless, and oppressed people have the power, if they unite, to affect the conditions of our lives.

by Lydia Gans

Thousands of people filled San Francisco Civic Center Plaza late in the afternoon of inauguration day, January 20, to express anger at George W. Bush's installation for a second term in office. They voiced anger at the war in Iraq, at the lies the president told to justify the war, at his Middle East policies, and at his favoring the interests of the wealthy at the cost of social programs for the needy. People carried all sorts of creative signs at the protest, and the usual vendors were out selling T-shirts, banners, books, and buttons.

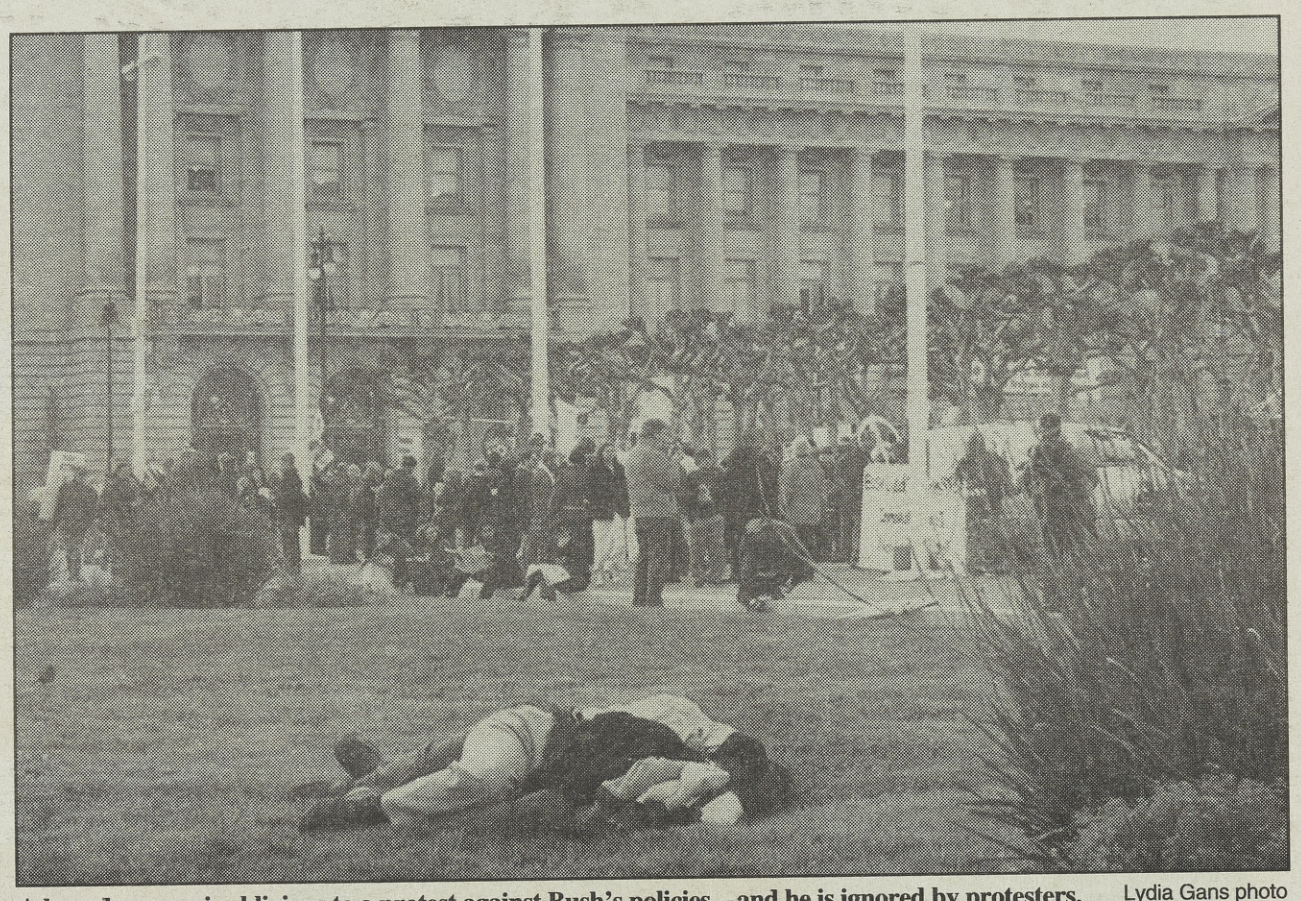
Civic Center Plaza and the surrounding area, especially the main library and United Nations Plaza, are generally populated by homeless people. The city has removed benches in an attempt to drive away homeless people, and, as a result, tourists and ordinary citizens out for a stroll have nowhere to linger. The homeless folks sit or lie on the ground. I was interested in their thoughts on the demonstrations, on the extent of their participation and how effective they considered them to be. The homeless and the poor are, after all, among the people most severely hurt by Bush's actions.

Not surprisingly, their participation was minimal, and their attitude tended to be cynical. However, they were far from hostile. They had opinions which they were eager to talk about with anyone who cared to pay attention. This was the same response I found last Fall when, under the sponsorship of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), we carried out a campaign to get homeless people to register and to vote. More on that later.

A man with a walker sitting by the library shrugged his shoulders when I asked what he thought about the demonstrators. "Let them talk," he said, but he saw no reason to go over and join them. His companion was equally noncommittal, though he agreed that everyone has the right to free speech. At this point, several police cars pulled up, disgorging a crew of officers. This jolted the homeless men out of their apathy even though — this *time — they weren't the targets of police surveillance.* "Here comes the Gestapo," they observed bitterly.

I strolled over to the mall area, past people sleeping on the grass not ten feet from all the action. A couple of homeless men were sitting on the low concrete wall near the Grove Street side. Their opinions, too, were colored by their own needs and experiences.

One of the men, an amputee who had a prosthetic leg, was agonizing over the difficulty of getting SSI (Supplemental Social Security) for people with disabilities. His application has been rejected and he is currently going through the appeal process. Maybe if he could convince them he was crazy, he speculated, he'd have a better chance at getting on SSI.



A homeless man is oblivious to a protest against Bush's policies—and he is ignored by protesters. Lydia Gans photo

What about the protest against Bush's plans to further curtail social programs, I asked, might that make a difference? The other man was cynical about the whole scene. In his eyes, the vendors, like all other capitalists, were there to make a profit even though it was just a buck or two on the T-shirts they were selling.

The one group that earned his praise had a table giving away "funny money" imprinted with pictures of Bush with slogans like "IN FRAUD WE TRUST" and "THE UNINFORMED STATE OF DENIAL," and listing a number of websites including 911forthetruth.com, 911inquiry.org, indymedia.org and others.

While we were talking, a young man approached with a stack of newspapers. He spoke with great sincerity of how his paper contained the truth about the evils of war, the oppression of the poor and the need to change conditions in the country. The homeless men listened politely and nodded appreciatively — until the young man informed them that they could buy the paper for only 50 cents.

To use the jargon of the day, there is a disconnect here. There are the people of good will and broad vision who dedicate themselves to political activism. And there are those who can't afford to because they have to put their energy into their day-to-day survival.

We observed that same pattern in November when we focused on the elections, getting homeless people to register and then out to vote. It's not that they don't care, or don't have thoughtful opinions about national or global issues. It's just harder for them to vote, because they have to pick up their mail in one location, hang on to the election materials with all their other necessities in a shopping cart until election day, then get to the proper polling place to vote during free time between securing some food and a bed for the night.

What will it take to make people feel all that is worth the effort? Poor, homeless, and oppressed people have the power, if they unite, to affect the conditions of our lives.

Howard Zinn, in his book *A Peoples History of the United States*, describes numerous actions undertaken by an aroused people protesting evil situations that needed to be changed. Zinn writes about sit-down strikes in factories against oppressive working conditions and at lunch counters against racial discrimination, about huge marches, demonstrations and general strikes that, for a moment, stopped the system in its tracks.

These things have happened throughout our history, and we have the power to do it today. It is time we organize, unite and assume that power. There is too much at stake for all of us to sit this one out.

Berkeley Fails to House the Poor

by Carol Denney

Back in September of 2004, a local letter writer to a Berkeley paper puzzled over an answer to the homeless situation. If he had turned a few pages in the same issue of *The Daily Planet* in which his letter appeared, he would have seen that a site which once housed more than 70 low-income people with come-as-you-are units (no large security deposits, leases, etc.) runs the risk of being replaced with a building housing only 20 people, with possibly one or two "low-income" units for the $35,000-a-year set.

The wonderfully researched front-page article by Richard Brenneman didn't mention one important and relevant fact about the building that once stood at Telegraph and Haste, a fact known only to a few. The 1986 fire which rendered the building unlivable was deliberately set. Friends of mine who lived in the building told the story of one entire wing of the building being told to evacuate just before the fire to reporter after reporter, most of whom would not print the story for fear of being sued. No one was ever prosecuted for the arson.

Berkeley Mayor Tom Bates and the current City Council love the theory that condominium and property owners "contribute to community stability" and have "a long-term interest in the community," neglecting to acknowledge that the rest of us do, too. They neglect to mention that the median income is so distorted by those who never have to think about the minimum wage as to be a useless measure of affordability.

It is a measure of intellectual bankruptcy to ignore this fact, and an obvious recipe for the most vulnerable, and perhaps occasionally ill-tempered, to end up on the street. Berkeley cannot point to its pathetic assortment of inadequate shelter beds and argue that they are meeting the same need as the building which once stood at Haste and Telegraph. The poor are chased from one end of town to the other and repeatedly and punitively ticketed; the people who burned down their homes were never charged.

Our community is understandably bothered by aggressive behavior, name-calling, and maybe begging itself. But the Mayor and the Berkeley City Council, in their aggressive enthusiasm for housing only the wealthy and the upper middle class in the name of "stability" while whining ceaselessly for more taxes, are far more guilty of such behavior than the poor.

Celebrating Poetry in the Arts District

A quarter-sheet flier can cause a lot of fuss

by Carol Denney

Madelyn Mackie, associate production manager of the Berkeley Repertory Theater, and her staff raced up and down Addison Street in Berkeley on Sunday, January 16, ripping the small, quarter-page fliers off the sidewalk where they'd been neatly placed between panels of poetry, offering "because of the event" as her excuse.

A Heyday Books representative, publisher of the poetry book being celebrated at the event, apologized for the theater manager's behavior, clarifying that the manager was not acting on Heyday Books' behalf.

Sherry Smith, former chair of the Berkeley Arts Commission, spent half an hour ripping up another 100 fliers from the streets, stating, "This is my free speech" when questioned. David Snippen, current chair of the Berkeley Arts Commission, apologized for her behavior.

The flier in question stated, "Hey poets and poetry lovers, next time don't pimp poetry for rich people's property values. Art should benefit us all." Or it sometimes ended with, "Art should stay hungry, like the rest of us," with a signature.

Hardly a call to arms, but clearly a gentle criticism of the peculiarly cozy nature of the sidewalk poetry art project and the Downtown Berkeley Association, some of whose members own property on Addison, now much more valuable with its publicly funded enhancement.

Robert Haas, the project's curator, bristled with indignation that anyone would flier the event, and refused to shake the flier writer's hand. Some poets implied that opportunities for poets are so few that if a little graft gets into the mix, it should be ignored.

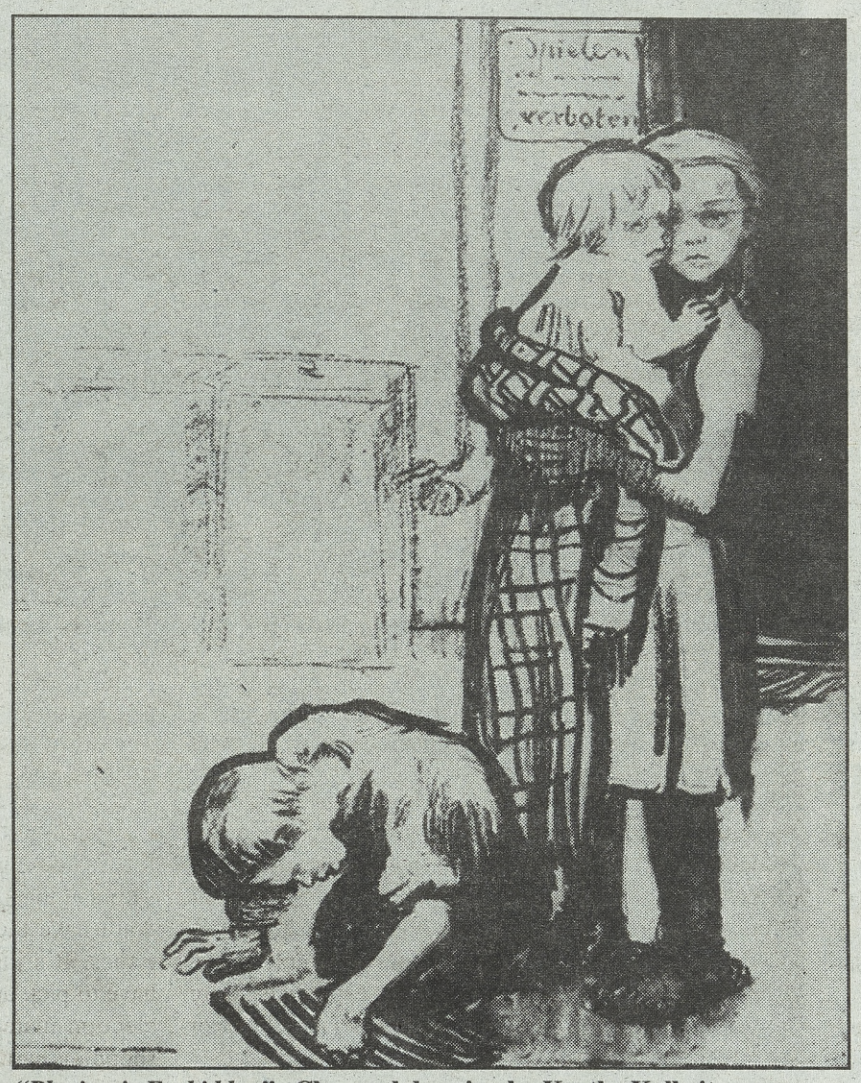
Perhaps. But other poets welcomed the fliers, expressing interest in the so-called Arts District's curious origin and the issue of funding disparity. Some of them managed to appreciate that no one was protesting poetry, or books, or anyone in particular. A few of us managed to agree that opportunities to participate in and experience the benefit of art projects ought to be equitably shared by everyone.

And someday, one hopes, everyone can agree that a tiny flier of protest, and the unexpected viewpoint it may illustrate, is as precious as poetry.

"Their children are like our own children"

The Mosque That Sheltered Jews

by Annette Herskovits



"Playing is Forbidden" **Charcoal drawing by Kaethe Kollwitz.**

"Yesterday at dawn, the Jews of Paris were arrested. The old, the women, and the children. In exile like ourselves, workers like ourselves. They are our brothers. Their children are like our own children. The one who encounters one of his children must give that child shelter and protection for as long as misfortune — or sorrow — lasts. Oh, man of my country, your heart is generous."
— A tract read to immigrant Algerian workers in Paris, asking them to help shelter Jewish children.

Auschwitz

by Eileen Corder

a young adolescent leans against her mother
I stare at the little dresses and caps
visitors break down in the corridors

candles burn in the snow
in front of the Wall of Death
bouquets of flowers are covered with snow

there is no heat
we have been here for hours
I am glad I am cold

The Art of Kaethe Kollwitz

Romain Rolland praised the German artist Kaethe Kollwitz for her solidarity with the victims. Her art, he said, conveys "a solemn and tender compassion. She is the voice of the silence of the sacrificed."

There is in the center of Paris a handsome mosque with a tall slender minaret and lovely gardens. It was built in the 1920s, as an expression of gratitude from France for the over half-million Muslims from its African possessions who fought alongside the French in the 1914-1918 war. About 100,000 of them died in the trenches.

During World War II, when the Germans occupied France, the mosque sheltered resistance fighters and North Africans who had escaped from German POW camps. (The French recruited 340,000 North African troops into the French army in 1939.) When the French police started rounding up Jews and delivering them to the German occupiers, the mosque sheltered Jews as well, most of them children.

The Nazi program called for eliminating all Jews, of any age. More than 11,600 Jewish children under 16, including 2,000 younger than six, were deported from France to be murdered at camps in eastern Europe. Still, 83 percent of the Jewish children living in France in 1939 survived. Most were "hidden," that is, given non-Jewish identities to keep them out of the authorities' reach. This required massive help from the French people.

Hiding children entailed a complex, extended organization. Rescuers had to get hold of the children, which often meant kidnapping them from detention centers or Jewish children's homes in full view of the Nazi occupiers. They had to procure false papers, find shelter (in foster homes, boarding schools, convents), raise funds to pay for upkeep, and send the payments without attracting attention.

They had to keep records, in code, of the children's true and false names and whereabouts, bring the children to their hiding places in small groups, and visit them regularly to ascertain that they were well treated. Many who participated in this work — both Jews and non-Jews — perished.

Innumerable French citizens provided aid of a less active kind: they remained silent, even when they suspected the children were fugitives. Many of the children were recent immigrants who spoke French with an accent and did not "look" French. A child might disclose his or her true name when surprised — or in defiance. Most at risk were very young children who needed repeated coaching.

I know this because I was a hidden child. When my parents were deported from Paris to Auschwitz in June of 1943, never to return, my 13-year-old sister and myself, just turned four, were in a foster home in the French countryside. With no more money coming for our keep and the danger to people sheltering Jews, our foster parents balked at keeping us. In the fall, I found myself hiding in a shabby Paris hotel room with my 17-year-old brother. My sister became a maid for a French family.

But by winter, thanks to my brother's astuteness and courage, my sister and I were taken in charge by a clandestine child rescue network, a secular organization in which Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and communist men and women participated. The organization saved 500 children, including my sister and me. As for my brother, he survived by his wits.

I learned of Muslims who helped rescue Jewish children only recently, in the newsletter of Enfants Cachés (Hidden Children), an association of Jews who survived the Holocaust in France as children.

The mosque-based resistance network consisted of people from Algeria's mountainous Kabylia regions. Kabyls are one of several North-African groups who have preserved their Berber language and culture; the Berbers inhabited North Africa before the Arabs invaded and introduced Islam in the 7th century. At least 95 percent of Algerian immigrants to France came from Kabylia. The network's Kabyls communicated in their Berber dialect, Tamazight, making infiltration almost impossible.

The soul of the network was the mosque's rector, Si Kaddour Benghabrit, a man with three nationalities — Algerian, Moroccan, and French — who moved with ease in all three worlds, and whose Islam was tolerant and inclusive.

More than 1,700 people are thought to have found short-term shelter in apartments on or near the grounds of the mosque. Benghabrit set up an alert system that allowed fugitives to disappear swiftly in case of a raid — if necessary to the prayer room's women's section, where men were normally not admitted. He wrote numerous false birth certificates making Jewish children into Muslims.

Access to Paris's sewers directly beneath the mosque's grounds provided an escape path, as did the mosque's proximity to the city's central wine market on the Seine, where barges laden with wine barrels came and went. One woman recalled being taken out of Paris on a barge; a Kabyl at the helm took fugitives concealed in his cargo to the south of France, where they could be smuggled to Algeria or Spain.

The French League against Racism and Antisemitism has asked Israel's Yad Vashem Institute to recognize Benghabrit as one of "The Righteous among the Nations," a title honoring non-Jews who risked their lives to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. Benghabrit would be the first Muslim to earn this distinction.

***

In these times of mutual hatred, a hatred that is sustained by distorted views of the "other," the story of Muslims saving Jewish children struck me as one Jews and Arabs especially should hear. This history strengthens my sense that mutuality and harmony make up the natural fabric of human relations. Division and cruelty are like torn places in that fabric. Surely, at certain times and places the tearing can be so thorough that it seems the fabric is not there. But that is an illusion.

My friend Mathis Szykowski, also a Holocaust survivor and a hidden child, testifies to this: "It must be said and repeated that in any account of survival, there are many people who will help, at great risk to themselves, people who appear almost mysteriously, whom you trust instinctively. No one can survive such circumstances by themselves. So it becomes obvious that in life as in death, we are all interdependent." A human being whose mind has not been distorted by ideology will instinctively help another in danger, especially a child.

Again and again over the years, I have heard stories of help that appeared unexpectedly, almost mysteriously, during those dark days. A friend recalls that when she was 11, living in Czechoslovakia, her parents were taken away by the Gestapo. By chance, she and her nine-year-old sister had been left behind, so they went to Gestapo headquarters themselves and told the guard they wanted to be reunited with their parents. The guard said "Go away!" several times, speaking softly so as not to be overheard, until they left. Somehow they survived. The SS guard had saved their lives.

Enmities between peoples come and go depending on intricate historical, psychological, and economic forces. Political powers will conceal or twist reality to suit their own ends. For most of the 1400 years since Islam's birth, Jews and Muslims lived in relative harmony in Arab lands.

Like the Christians, Jews were *dhimmis* (protected people): Islam protected their lives, property, and right to worship. Jews enjoyed no such rights in the Christian world until the French Revolution. To be sure, dhimmis were placed below Muslims — they had to pay a special tax, could not ride horses, etc. — but the application of these restrictions varied; with enlightened rulers, the Jews prospered.

In his book *Le Passé d'une Discorde: Juifs et Arabes du VIIe Siécle á nos Jours (The Days Before the Breach: Jews and Arabs from the 7th Century to Today)*, Israeli historian Michel Abitbol writes about "the historical drama which, in less than half a century, ended two thousand years of Jewish life in the Arab countries." And he describes the "resplendent Judeo-Arab civilization, one whose inexhaustible intellectual and religious riches nourished the entire Jewish world until the dawn of modern times."

***

On July 16, 1942, Paris police set out to arrest 28,000 Jews on orders of the French Vichy collaborationist government. They had in hand names and addresses, obtained from a census of Jews the Germans had ordered soon after they occupied France. That day and the next, the police fanned out through the city, packing the arrested Jews into requisitioned city buses. They found only 13,000 — largely because some police officers had spread the word ahead of time and many Jews had fled. More than 4,000 children aged 2 to 16 were among those arrested.

On the second day, a tract was circulated through the miserable hotels that were home to immigrant Algerian workers. The tract, in Tamazight, was read out loud to the mostly illiterate men: "Yesterday at dawn, the Jews of Paris were arrested. The old, the women, and the children. In exile like ourselves, workers like ourselves. They are our brothers. Their children are like our own children. The one who encounters one of his children must give that child shelter and protection for as long as misfortune — or sorrow — lasts. Oh, man of my country, your heart is generous."

We can't know how much help these men were able to give.

***

Most of the children captured in that July raid were taken with their mothers to camps near Paris. There, French police

See **Mosque Sheltered Jews** *page 15*

Berkeley Cops Serve Christmas Dinner for Homeless People

by Lydia Gans

It's too bad that we need Christmas as an excuse to give presents, share a good meal, communicate and express kind feelings between people who are usually at odds with each other — people like the police and the homeless. On December 22, 2004, the Berkeley police bicycle unit, spearheaded by officer Tom Jeremiason, put on a traditional holiday feast at MASC (the MultiAgency Service Collaborative) in the Veterans Building.

All the bike cops were there, as were Berkeley Mayor Tom Bates and representatives of other city agencies, all helping serve the meal. Organized in conjunction with BOSS, the event has become an annual tradition.

Officer Jeremiason boasted, justifiably, that except for the turkeys, which were prepared by Andronico's, he and his wife Laurie cooked the rest of the meal, including stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, corn and beans. Kudos to Tom and Laurie; everyone agreed it was an excellent meal.

The cops also gave out gifts which had been donated to BOSS — fanny packs containing useful items, including gloves, ponchos, hats and socks — though, unfortunately, there were not enough for everybody. Robert Long of the MASC staff estimated that there were about 400 people at the meal, and 175 fanny packs were distributed. Those who received the packs were very appreciative; it's too bad there weren't enough to go around.

In an atmosphere fraught with negative interactions between the police and people who are homeless, feelings about this event were mixed. Tony expressed the feelings of some street people, saying his attitude toward the police hasn't changed "just because they smile."

Michael Anthony, who has also been on the streets, was much more positive. He said, "They seemed less intimidating than usual, seem more human. I enjoyed their company for a change — might even make a few friends." Whatever their feelings about the police, the diners didn't mind saying that they enjoyed the meal.

Tom Jeremiason also sees this dinner as a way to relate to people in a positive environment. He reflected on last year's event when, he said, "there was really good interaction between people. It's just like families — you sit down at tables, you discuss things, talk about things and joke. That's what this is all about. Just giving back a little bit. That's the most important thing about this." He described a number of other volunteer activities the police engage in to help the community.



MASC staffers, Berkeley police officers and Mayor Tom Bates serve a holiday meal to the poor. Lydia Gans photo

The people who work at MASC also gave a valuable gift to their clients. MASC staffer Robert Long said that, while normally the facility would be closed on the Fridays and Saturdays around Christmas and New Year's, staff members decided to give up their holiday time to keep the facility open for its regular hours.

Talking about the bad reputation that cops have on the street, Jeremiason pleaded that people "evaluate the person in the uniform, not the uniform." The bike cops, especially, he said, see their role on the street like the old-fashioned beat cop. "People come to us with all their problems and we're part social worker, counselor, and part cop and part school teacher, all wrapped up in one."

Unfortunately, the bike cops are not trained to be social workers or counselors or teachers; those needs should be filled by other city agencies. The police are trained to enforce the laws. And the laws can be very unfriendly, oppressive and punitive to some classes of people, particularly poor people. Many homeless people in Berkeley have been given tickets and criminalized by bike cops and other police officers merely for being out on the streets and sidewalks, with no place to call home.

If a city fails to provide adequate services and affordable housing in favor of gentrification, the police have to participate in a law-and-order approach to the problem of homelessness, and all the counseling and turkey dinners won't help them be accepted as the good guys.

Blessing, Begging and Grace

Will Work for Food or $
A Memoir From the Roadside
by Bruce Moody

Book Review by Joel Fallon

Compelling Nonfiction

I attended a poetry reading in Crockett a few weeks ago and heard Bruce Moody read an essay. He mentioned that the Arizona Author's Association had awarded his new book, *Will Work for Food or $, A Memoir From the Roadside*, the 2004 first prize for Best Non-Fiction. I bought a copy of his book and was immediately hooked by this compelling page-turner. It demanded every spare minute for the next two days. And I have thought about it every day since then.

Fired

Bruce got canned and was being crushed by expenses — rent, utilities, insurance, automobile, food. Unable to live on a minimum wage, he had to stay alive somehow until he could find a job that paid enough. How does he face his friends with this new reality? How does he deal with his pride? What advice does he have for other folks down on their luck? What would I do? What would you do? This compelling survival story is a mix of Zen-like self-realization, practicality, mysticism and humility.

Rules for survival

Bruce meets a man in the same sort of jobless predicament and gets sound advice — rules of conduct dealing with humility and honest work ethics. Bruce bites the bullet, embraces his new lifestyle and stands by the side of a road with a hand-lettered sign: "Will work for Food or $."

He is shielded and strengthened by the rules; they prove to be effective. One of the most curiously powerful rules is blessing those who provide food or money and also blessing those who don't: "Bless you old lady with the pink hair, bless you Hostess Cupcake truck, bless you flivver, bless you glass truck..." The blessing is a wonderful mantra.

Is he begging?

Not really. He offers himself to those who need work done — mundane jobs, hard jobs, yard work, dirty jobs, cleaning out gutters. "Hey, ya wanna move a grand piano?" "Sure, when?" Bruce refuses jobs that involve illegal activity but accepts all other jobs. Not everybody needs work and not everybody gives him food or money, but all receive his blessing.

This act of giving and receiving food and money, and giving and receiving a blessing, transforms and enriches both giver and receiver. It's like giving alms to a monk who rattles his wooden bowl. The monk benefits and the contributor improves his karma. The blessing mantra imparts a sustaining grace to those bestowing and receiving.

A different view

Before reading Bruce Moody's book I used to think, "Why don't these bums get a job?" or "These junkies will spend anything I give 'em for drugs or wine." Moody's book pokes a window through a previously solid wall in my mind. Now I can't automatically characterize these folks as "bums" or "junkies." Now they have faces, real faces, faces like Moody's, like yours and like mine.

Maybe, like Moody, these folks are blessing me. My God, don't I have a job or some spare change for somebody who may be blessing me? If not, surely for their sake and my own, I can bless them right back. Read and share this book. More lives may be touched than you can imagine.

Cruel and Painful Medical Practices

by Jack Bragen

As a writer, there is nothing worse than being so intensely angered that I can't write on the outrageous subject in question. At Western Dental, which accepts patient's Medi-Cal, it evidently is too inconvenient to have any regard for the time, the comfort, or the teeth of the patient.

Western Dental is a mass-production dental operation with one or two actual licensed dentists who supervise a bunch of students that do the actual work on people's mouths. Wait times in the waiting room are frequently two to three hours *with* an appointment. Once in the chair, the patient will wait for stretches of 45 minute at a time as the intern goes to work on someone else. This means waiting in a chair with a mouth open and half worked on and full of gauze for long stretches of time until the intern has a moment.

Western Dental visits are an all-day project for something that would require an hour at a reasonable dentist. Then, things get more complicated. Western refuses to finish root canals that they started. They blame the patient for this problem because he/she missed too many appointments. Who wouldn't miss an appointment in this pain factory? My loud and irate reaction to them was logged in a relative's chart.

Longs Drugs is subtler. I can only speak of my particular location. Rather than being proactive and filling prescriptions in a trouble-free and timely manner, they prefer to create unnecessary problems for mentally ill consumers. Their manner toward those who receive psychiatric medications is rude and condescending. They create delays and difficulties at every possible juncture. It is a mystery. My local Longs must feel that the mentally ill are not their "real patients" and should go elsewhere.

Sadistic behavior shows itself in more and less gross ways in different places. It likes to hang out in places where people are vulnerable — especially where there doesn't appear to be adequate advocacy in place or a system to keep people honest.

It is important that we shed a light on these places—and possibly a camcorder.

Another

by Joan Clair

Oh god, not another!
Day after day when I walked my dog
I saw her sitting on a bench by a bus stop.
She always had bundles around her,
a tall, elegant-looking woman.
She seemed fixed there.
Was she waiting for a bus?
Was she homeless?
I hoped not.
And now the cart,
The bundles inside look familiar,
right by the bus stop.
It is getting dark.
And now, no woman.

Consider...

by Claire Baker

The "have nots" are really
the "haves," like (have) no job,
no place to sleep or weep,
little hope that isn't yanked
right back from under
their faltering feet.

Have to move on, no matter
what time of night or day.
By the time this poem is read
by anyone with an iota of care,
too many homeless will have
faced extreme deprivation...

Blind Faith and Fabrications in Bush White House

by Bill Berkowitz

"It's true that much attention is being placed on the war in Iraq, but there's also another war that's going on. It's a culture war that really gets to the heart of the questions about what is the role of faith in the public square."

— Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, during a conference promoting the funding of religious groups engaged in social service activities, July 2004

"President Bush does not want to proselytize or fund religion. We're talking about things like job training and substance abuse prevention, and opening up to small groups that have been shut [out] by the ACLU and a radical fringe that wants an extreme separation of church and state."

— Jim Towey, *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 17, 2004



Art by Doug Minkler

In the coming year, while secular organizations providing much-needed social services to the poor will likely need the Jaws of Life to pry money from the Bush administration, faith-based organizations will be taking in money hand over fist. In 2003 alone, the administration handed out $1.17 billion in grants to religious organizations, and if the president has his way, individual states will soon be handing over hundreds of millions of dollars to faith-based organizations.

A report entitled "The Expanding Administrative Presidency: George W. Bush and the Faith-Based Initiative," issued this past summer by the Rockefeller Institute of Government in Albany, N.Y., pointed out that religious organizations have now become involved in a wide range of "government-encouraged activities... from building strip malls for economic improvement to promoting child car seats." The report also noted that Bush's faith-based programs "mark a major shift in the constitutional separation of church and state."

Four years ago, an impressive array of pastors, preachers, rabbis and community leaders shared the White House platform with President Bush as he announced the establishment of The White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. As months passed, and Congress debated some of the thorny issues surrounding Bush's faith-based proposal — including fudging the lines separating church and state, and the propensity of religious organizations to discriminate in their hiring practices against those of other religions, or sexual orientation — the president moved forward, installing faith-based branch offices in a number of federal agencies.

By June 2004, he had added the Department of Commerce, the Small Business Administration and the Department of Veterans Affairs to seven other agencies that had already been involved with faith-based projects.

Despite the administration's inability to pass a comprehensive faith-based package through Congress, "Few if any presidents in recent history have reached as deeply into or as broadly across the government to implement a presidential initiative administratively," Rockefeller Institute director Richard Nathan said.

During the 2000 presidential campaign, Bush spoke repeatedly of the ability of faith-based organizations to transform lives. Armed with a great deal of faith but little data, the Texas governor "told audiences that religious organizations succeed where others fail 'because they change hearts, they convince a person to turn their life over to Christ.' Whenever 'my administration sees a responsibility to help people,' he promised, 'we will look first to faith-based organizations that have shown their ability to save and change lives.'"

After four years and throwing hundreds of millions at the problem, are faith-based organizations serving the needs of the poor better than secular organizations? Certainly in an administration concerned with "results," there must be studies proving the efficacy of the Bush administration's faith-based theories. But there aren't.

According to Amy Sullivan, there aren't such studies. In an October 2004 story in the *Washington Monthly* entitled "Faith Without Works: After four years, the president's faith-based policies have proven to be neither compassionate nor conservative," Sullivan points out that the administration has failed to systematically track and "monitor the effectiveness" of programs run by faith-based groups.

"The policy of funding the work of faith-based organizations has, in the face of slashed social service budgets, devolved into a small pork-barrel program that offers token grants to... religious constituencies... while making almost no effort to monitor their effectiveness...."

"Results, results, results," was Bush's oft-repeated mantra. Sullivan cites an interview with the religious website Beliefnet, where Bush was asked whether he would support government money going to a Muslim group that taught prisoners the Koran. "The question I'd be asking," Bush replied, "is what are the recidivism rates? Is it working? I wouldn't object at all if the program worked." According to Sullivan, "four more times in the interview, Bush mentioned 'results,' noting that instead of promoting religion, 'I'm promoting lower recidivism rates, and we will measure to make sure that's the case.'"

Where do we stand in terms of measuring "results?" According to Sullivan, "it turns out that the Bush administration forgot to require evaluation of organizations that receive government grants."

An August 2004 study released by the Pew-funded Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy found that "while more elaborate scientific studies are underway, the White House has relied on largely anecdotal evidence to support the view that faith-based approaches produce better long-term results."

Sullivan reports, "There is no evidence that faith-based organizations work better than their secular counterparts; and, in some cases, they are actually less effective.

"In one study funded by the Ford Foundation, investigators found that faith-based job training programs placed only 31 percent of their clients in full-time employment while the number for secular organizations was 53 percent. And Teen Challenge's [a Texas-based drug program often spoken highly of by Bush] much ballyhooed 86 percent rehabilitation rate falls apart under examination — the number doesn't include those who dropped out of Teen Challenge and relies on a disturbingly small sample of those graduates who self-reported whether they had remained sober, significantly tilting the results."

In Bush's second term, he is "setting its sights on money doled out by the states," for social services, the Associated Press recently reported. "The goal is to persuade states to funnel more of the federal money for social service programs that they administer to 'faith-based organizations.'"

To encourage states to participate, the White House has hosted a series of conferences. Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, has met with state leaders and the president "has personally lobbied governors," the Associated Press reported. "The White House office also is providing states with technical assistance in setting up their own faith-based offices." Thus far, some 21 governors — both Democrat and Republican — have set up their own faith-based offices.

The White House isn't alone in tutoring faith-based groups about how to apply for government grants. The Community & Faith-Based Grants Institute, an organization run by the Tucson, Arizona-based Faith-Based Institute, is offering a "video seminar on Faith Based Initiative grant writing [which] picks up where the free grant writing seminars by the government leave off."

The Institute has lined up an impressive array of former administration insiders and veterans of various U.S. charities as seminar instructors, including Dave Donaldson, the founder and CEO of We Care America which "works closely with the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives to educate and engage the Christian community on the Faith-Based Initiative." Other Institute instructors include Michael McCarthy, manager of The Center for Capacity Development, "a fee-for-service division" of The WorkPlace, Inc.; Amy Sherman, a Senior Fellow of the Hudson Institute's Welfare Policy Center and the founder of Charlottesville Abundant Life Ministries; and Dr. Stanley Carlson-Thies, director of the Civitas Program in Faith in Public Affairs, The Center for Public Justice and former OFBCI staff member.

Jim Towey sees a bright future for faith-based organizations to shoulder a larger part of the load in providing for people in need. "We're on the sunrise side of the mountain," he proclaimed.

While it's a long way from the cushy air-conditioned offices of Jim Towey's White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, to the dusty devastated streets of Fallujah, the president's war in Iraq and his crusade to have faith-based organizations be the primary engine for delivering social services to the needy in this country may have a lot more in common than at first meets the eye.

Bush's war in Iraq was built on fabrications and faith: The administration fabricated claims about Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction, Saddam Hussein's relationship with al-Qaeda's Osama bin Laden, and the Iraqi dictator's connection to 9/11. Bush faithfully believed that his wild-eyed neoconservative advisors would be proved right when they predicted that U.S. troops would be welcomed with open arms by the people of Iraq, and that reconstruction would be a "slam dunk," to borrow a phrase from former CIA director George Tenet. The neocons were wrong and reconstruction has been a non-starter.

The president's faith-based initiative — the centerpiece of his domestic policy agenda — is also a combination of fabrications and faith, with a batch of anecdotes thrown in for good measure. Despite the lack of any concrete data, the Bush administration insisted that faith-based groups would provide social services to the poor and addicted more effectively than secular programs. No data existed four years ago, and little more than anecdotal evidence exists today. In addition, the president's personal narrative — saved from the ravages of alcoholism by his faith — is driving the program.

Built on faith and fabrications, President Bush's long hard slog in Iraq continues to produce death, destruction and a growing insurgency. At home, as poverty deepens, Bush's faith-based initiative, also built on fabrications and faith, is now heading toward a state near you.

Turkey in the Straw

by Joel Fallon

Summer time and there's no breeze anywhere
on the east side of town.
Four days till payday and the kids beg for money
when the ice cream truck plays
"Turkey in the Straw."

Mothers crouch in dim, warm rooms
watching Jerry Springer,
slowly going mad, wondering if
the meatloaf has gone bad.
No breeze anywhere on the east side of town.

The ice cream truck plays "Turkey in the Straw,"
and kids, like Pavlov's dog, begin to salivate.
Four days till payday. The water bill is overdue.
The car is on the fritz. The old man took a pay cut.
And the ice cream truck plays
"Turkey in the Straw."

The government says we're better off than ever,
but there are no coins under the couch cushions,
and the meatloaf has gone bad.
Summer, four days till payday
on the east side of town,
and the ice cream truck plays
"Turkey in the Straw."

Poor Leonard's Almanack

Quotations and Original Thoughts
by Leonard Roy Frank
Street Spirit February 2005

On Genius

1. The individuals who seem to us most outstanding, who are honored with the name of genius, are those who have proposed to enact the fate of all humanity in their personal existences.
SIMONE de BEAUVOIR (French philosopher), *The Second Sex*, 1950, translated by H. M. Parshley, 1952

2. I have known no man of genius who had not to pay, in some affliction or defect either physical or spiritual, for what the gods had given him.
SIR MAX BEERBOHM (English writer), "No. 2, The Pines," *And Even Now*, 1920

3. The difference between genius and stupidity is that even genius has its limits.
RITA MAE BROWN (writer), *Bingo*, 1988

4. Since when was genius found respectable?
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING (English poet), *Aurora Leigh*, 1857

5. You may have heard people repeat what I have said, "Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration." Yes, sir, it's mostly *hard work*.
THOMAS ALVA EDISON (inventor, 1847-1931), remark to M. A. Rosanoff, "Edison in His Laboratory," *Harper's*, September 1932

6. When nature has work to be done, she creates a genius to do it.
RALPH WALDO EMERSON (philosopher), "The Method of Nature," address, Waterville (later Colby) College (Maine), 11 August 1841

7. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.
RALPH WALDO EMERSON, "Self-Reliance," *Essays: First Series*, 1841

8. The true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.
RALPH WALDO EMERSON, "Experience" (closing sentence), *Essays: Second Series*, 1844

9. Genius without Education is like Silver in the Mine.
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, *Poor Richard's Almanack*, August 1750

10. If children grew up according to early indications, we should have nothing but geniuses.
GOETHE (German poet and playwright, 1749-1832), quoted in Norman Lockridge, editor, *World's Wit and Wisdom*, 1936

11. An occasional genius, by extremely dexterous and willful actions, may achieve a historical mutation.
CARL G. GUSTAVSON (historian), *A Preface to History*, 1955

12. Constant effort and frequent mistakes are the stepping stones of genius.
ELBERT HUBBARD (editor and writer, 1856-1915), *The Philosophy of Elbert Hubbard*, edited by Elbert Hubbard II, 1930

13. Genius means little more than the faculty of perceiving in an unhabitual way.
WILLIAM JAMES (philosopher), *The Principles of Psychology*, 1890

14. What the world needs is more geniuses with humility. There are so few of us left.
OSCAR LEVANT (pianist, actor and public wit, 1906-1972), quoted in Fred Metcalf, editor, *The Penguin Dictionary of Modern Humorous Quotations*,1986

15.The man who early on regards himself as a genius is lost.
GEORG CHRISTOPH LICHTENBERG (German scientist and drama critic, 1742-1799), *Aphorisms*, 1806, translated by R. J. Hollingdale, 1990

16. Towering genius disdains a beaten path.
ABRAHAM LINCOLN, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," address to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield (Illinois), 27 January 1838

17. A profound dislike for merely absorbing knowledge and a compulsion to learn by doing are among the most reliable signs of genius.
SYLVIA NASAR (writer), "A Beautiful Mind," *Vanity Fair*, June 1998

18. The concept of genius as akin to madness has been carefully fostered by the inferiority complex of the public.
EZRA POUND (poet, 1885-1972), quoted in Rhoda Thomas Tripp, editor, *The International Thesaurus of Quotations*, 1970

19. His mere personal life [is] something subordinate, serving only to advance ends higher than itself.
ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER (German philosopher), "The Art of Literature: On Genius," *Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer*, translated by T. Bailey Saunders, 1851

20. It is necessary for the welfare of society that genius should be privileged to utter sedition, to blaspheme, to outrage good taste, to corrupt the youthful mind, and, generally, to scandalize its uncles.
GEORGE BERNARD SHAW (Irish-born British playwright), preface (1908) to *The Sanity of Art*, 1895

21. It takes a lot of time to be a genius; you have to sit around so much doing nothing, really doing nothing.
GERTRUDE STEIN (writer), *Everybody's Autobiography*, 1937

22. When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him.
JONATHAN SWIFT (Irish writer), "Thoughts on Various Subjects," 1727

23. The persecution of genius fosters its influence.
TACITUS (Roman historian, 1st century A.D.), *Annals*, translated by Alfred J. Church and William J. Brodribb, 1964

24. The emergence of a superman or a great mystic or a genius or a superior personality inevitably precipitates a social conflict. The conflict will be more or less acute, according to the degree in which the creative individual happens to rise above the average level of his former kin and kind. But some conflict is inevitable, since the social equilibrium which the genius has upset by the mere fact of his personal emergence has eventually to be restored either by his social triumph or by his social defeat.
ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE (English historian), *A Study of History*, 1934

25. The public is wonderfully tolerant. It forgives everything except genius.
OSCAR WILDE (Irish-born British playwright), "The Critic as Artist," *Intentions*, 1891

26. Divorced from each other, neither genius nor talent go very far.

27. Genius finds a way — when there is no way.

28. Struggle is the whetstone on which genius sharpens itself.

****

Leonard Roy Frank is the editor of *Random House Webster's Quotationary*. Last year Random House published his *Freedom: Quotes and Passages from the World's Greatest Freethinkers* and 5 gift books titled *Inspiration*, *Love*, *Money*, *Wisdom*, and *Wit*.

Message of Mary Jesus

from page two

period. Of course, that was until some greedy landlord bought the property I resided in and immediately evicted me because I had the cheapest rents in the building. My anger at that bastard knew no bounds. To this day, I still miss the garden that I nourished for so many years in the backyard of the property.

Mary Jesus was a splendid character and was unmistakable in the neighborhood. She generally dressed all in black, with dark shades and long, flowing, dark hair. She seemed rather fierce in her own way. Not the type of person that I would want to get into a feud with.

We got to know one another a bit, and at times we went out for a bite to eat and a chat. At one point, I helped her to plant some new flowers and other plants in front of the building where she resided. She was the resident manager at that time.

In a crazy world that's gone totally mad, Mary Jesus was no crazier than anyone else; and it's a shame that the media pundits insinuated that she was a lunatic who lacked therapy, when they wrote the stories about what had occurred on December 10 at the Tribune Tower.

Neither therapy, nor the leather restraints and Thorazine at John George Psychiatric Pavilion, would have done a thing to keep the profiteers from evicting her from the home she loved, even though she had lived there long enough to be a part owner of the building by now.

Mary Jesus was targeted and the whole weight of the legal system was set in motion to push her over the edge.

Many landlords in Oakland have been cruel enough in their pursuit of profits to make many a soul in Oakland consider suicide as an escape from their greedy grasp. Believe it. I get calls and e-mails from desperate tenants all the time, and at times suicide seems like an option in a world where the rents are so high that people become convinced that they will never come up with the cash needed to move into some other slumlord's rat-infested hellhole.

Her landlords are lucky that Mary Jesus did not do to them what she had done to herself. That would have given the *Tribune* and the *Chronicle* something to write about; but that was not what her message was all about. Instead, Mary Jesus took her own life to expose the legal system that exists here in Oakland, and the greedy landlords that use the system to push their renters over the edge.

On October 18, 2004, I received an e-mail from V. Vale of Re/Search Publications, asking for help to stop Mary Jesus's eviction. I immediately responded, and sent off a good-sized list of attorneys' names and phone numbers, including the Eviction Defense Center. I gave instructions for Mary Jesus to take action as soon as possible to stop the eviction and to contact an attorney immediately for assistance.

I was happy to do what little I could to stop the profiteers from dumping her out onto the cold-hearted streets of Oakland. I live for moments like this.

Indeed, when V. Vale contacted me, he had no idea that I actually knew Mary Jesus, and was totally surprised that I knew a few things about her. I sent him a list of attorneys and instructions which he handed over to Mary Jesus. Vale also called some of the attorneys to see if he could line one of them up to help Mary Jesus in her time of need.

It felt good to hear back from Vale, and to receive a thank you for being there to help. I thought that I had done my part to help, and set my mind to other tasks. I did not see, I could not see, the dark future that was looming just ahead.

I cannot get the picture out of my head of Mary Jesus standing there high above the street, just before she plunged to her death. I keep thinking of what she may have been feeling those last few moments and days of her life. I keep wondering how her short life of 33 years finally ended so tragically atop the Tribune Tower.

I wish I could have done more to help keep a roof over her head and preserve her right to remain in her much-loved home.

It was somewhat of a comfort to learn that Mary Jesus spent the last evening of her life with Vale and his wife Marion in San Francisco. These two had tried their best to help her fight the eviction proceedings that ended up pushing her over the edge. They had offered her shelter from the storm when she needed it the most.

I can't help but cry when I think of the last few moments of Mary Jesus, and what she must have been going through as she gazed upon the crowd of 200 onlookers that witnessed her death. I can't help but think about her final hours as she made copies of her suicide note and the message she wanted the people to read.

The message of Mary Jesus is splattered with the blood of her ultimate sacrifice — a sacrifice that ensured her voice would be heard loud and clear.

She is pointing her finger at the landlords, the judges and the legal system that pushed her over the edge. I call for an immediate and thorough investigation into the cases that Mary Jesus refers to in her message to the people.

It will be up to each and every one of us to take the message of Mary Jesus to heart, and to do whatever is necessary to make certain that the injustices that pushed her over the edge will be exposed and held accountable.

May Mary Jesus rest in peace, and may her troubled soul find some happiness in the next dimension of reality, far removed from the greedy landlords and war criminals that have wreaked havoc on the American people and the world at large.

Lynda Carson may be reached at (510) 763-1085 or tenantsrule@yahoo.com

What Would MLK Do?

from page eight

While attention to the homeownership gap is welcome, much more should be done. Rising home prices, falling incomes, deceptive predatory loans, and discrimination block many renters of color from homeownership.

So WWMLKD? Of course, there is no quick fix for centuries of unequal opportunity, but there are many positive steps the federal government could take. The next Bush administration should maintain those few progressive taxes we do have, such as the estate tax, which funds services and programs for the neediest through after-death taxes on multimillionaires.

We need new policies that encourage wealth-building. Imagine a brand-new version of the post-WWII GI Bill, one that helps Americans build up nest eggs, get mortgages, and fund higher education. The money could come from closing corporate loopholes and giveaways.

King was greatly disturbed by the complacency of many Americans towards the economic injustice around them. He said, "Let us be dissatisfied until those who live on the outskirts of hope are brought into the metropolis of daily security."

We should take heed as we inaugurate another four years of President Bush. The dream of economic security is still out of reach for many. If the president wants to honor King, he should do it not with words or a wreath, but with actions that patch up our damaged ladder of opportunity.

Mara Voukydis (mvoukydis@faireconomy.org) is a researcher at United for a Fair Economy (www.FairEconomy.org) and co-author of UFE's new report, *The State of the Dream 2005: Disowned in the Ownership Society*. United for a Fair Economy raises awareness of the damaging consequences of concentrated wealth and power.

Labor Needs Radical Vision of Social Justice

from page five

protest. For unions who want workers outside their ranks to feel they represent their interests, this was a terrible mistake. But it was compounded when Bush banned unions for the new screener workforce. Once again, an attack on the rights of immigrants led to attacks on the rights of workers generally — a move which called for mass opposition and was met instead with more silence.

Labor needs an outspoken policy that defends the civil rights of all sections of U.S. society, and is willing to take on the Bush administration in an open fight to protect them.

If the war on terror scares labor into silence, few workers will feel confident in risking their jobs (and freedom) to join unions. Yet people far beyond unions will defend labor rights if they are part of a broader civil rights agenda, and if the labor movement is willing to go to bat with community organizations for it.

Political calculations in Washington shouldn't be the guide to labor's policy on immigration and civil rights. Workers need a movement that fights for what they really need, not what lobbyists say a Republican administration and Congress will accept. The position won at the AFL-CIO's Los Angeles convention — calling for immigration amnesty, the repeal of employer sanctions, and a halt to corporate guest worker proposals — has yet to be achieved in real life.

A new direction on civil rights requires linking immigrant rights to a real jobs program and full employment economy. It demands affirmative action that can come to grips with the devastation in communities of color, especially African American communities. Some unions, particularly HERE, have moved from rhetoric to actual contract proposals linking immigrant rights and jobs for underrepresented communities.

But this is just a step towards unity, and it is already endangered by proposals for new guest worker programs that will pit immigrants against the unemployed. As employer lobbyists continually point out, jobs and immigration are tied together. Corporations will either pit people against each other at the bottom of the workforce, or labor will unite them in a struggle for their mutual interest.

When Tom Donahue and the old Kirkland administration were defeated in 1995, activists on all levels of the labor movement expected that the AFL-CIO would take down the Cold War barriers. Labor's Cold War foreign policy separated U.S. unions from workers around the world, and often betrayed them in the interest of U.S. foreign policy.

The demand to change this policy was partly driven by the impact of NAFTA on the consciousness of millions of U.S. workers. For the first time in decades, pressure came from below, from local unions and rank-and-filers, demanding that the labor movement seek alliances with workers abroad based on common interest. In an era when the fate of millions of U.S. workers is tied to the international system of production and markets, this is a survival question.

A growing number of workers, both inside and outside unions, today understand that an effective response to globalization will affect their own welfare. For the first time since the 1940s, millions of U.S. workers can be, and have been, drawn into the fight against the global free market economy, from Seattle to Miami.

The neoliberal policies imposed by the United States and other wealthy countries attack living standards, workers rights and the public sector everywhere. Increasingly, they are imposed at the point of a gun, using the war on terror as a pretext to suppress opposition. The U.S. labor movement should be, and can be, the most outspoken advocate for peace, since eroded standards and privatization are used to attract corporate investment, and the further export of jobs and production.

Instead, after expressing doubts before the invasion of Iraq, the AFL-CIO stood silent once the war began. Some unions made opposition to the war part of their election campaign, but the official AFL-CIO apparatus accepted the false logic that speaking out on the war was the "kiss of death." The opposite proved true.

Some 10.5 million voters from union households said the war was the most important issue to them. To the 51 percent who voted for Kerry, the campaign had nothing to say. And for the 49 percent who voted for Bush — families with children in the service, or reservists, or honest people affected by national security hysteria — no effort was made to convince them that the war was as bad for working families at home as it was for the Iraqis whose country is being destroyed. Silence on the war had a high price.

The AFL-CIO needs a program that opposes the effort to implement neoliberal policies internationally, taking a consistent approach from Mexico to China, from Baghdad to Bogota.

Moving away from the Cold War past was a watershed development as important as the change on immigration, and related to it. But change in the labor movement's international activity has been incomplete. A new direction in international relations should be based on solidarity, and solidarity is a two-way street. The end of labor's Cold War policy has to be made explicit, as part of finding a new set of principles for our relations with unions and workers in other countries.

While some of those principles are embodied in ILO labor standards calling for the right to organize, an end to child labor, and other protections, unions in developing countries increasingly demand a broader agenda. In particular, they want greater help in defending the public sector under attack from privatization, and an international system for defending the rights of migrants. New international relationships need to be based on the ability of U.S. unions to listen to the concerns of labor in the developing world, and not just impose its own agenda, however well-intentioned.

A new, more radical political program runs counter to the prevailing wisdom of our times, which holds the profit motive sacred, and believes that market forces solve all social problems. If labor's leaders move in this direction, they won't get invited for coffee with President Bush, or included in meetings of the Democratic Leadership Council.

At the beginning of the Cold War, the AFL-CIO built its headquarters right down the street from the White House, eloquent testimony to the desire of its old leaders for respectability in the eyes of the political elite. That dream may be difficult for some to give up. But labor can't speak convincingly to the working poor without, at the same time, directly opposing the common economic understanding shared by Republicans and many Democrats.

The labor movement needs political independence. To organize by the millions, workers have to make hard decisions, putting their jobs on the line for the sake of their future. Unions of past decades won the loyalty of working people when joining one was even more dangerous and illegal than it is today.

The left in labor then proposed an alternative social vision — that society could be organized to ensure social and economic justice for all people. While some workers believed that change could be made within the capitalist system, and others argued for replacing it, they were united by the idea that working people could gain enough political power to end poverty, unemployment, racism, and discrimination.

The poor will not be always with us, they declared.

Today, our biggest problem is finding similar ways for unions to affect workers' consciousness — the way people think. A new commitment to organizing can't be simply a matter of more money and organizers, or more intelligent and innovative tactics, or structural change, as necessary as these things are.

During the periods in our history when unions grew by qualitative leaps, their activity relied on workers organizing themselves, not just acting as troops in campaigns masterminded by paid staff.

For workers to act in this way today, they would have to have a much clearer sense of their own interests, and a vision that large-scale social change is possible. Does the labor movement present such a vision of a more just society, capable of inspiring workers to struggle and sacrifice?

Labor's radical vision of decades ago made it a stronger movement. Losing it in the red scares of the 1950s deprived most unions of their ability to inspire. It's no accident that the years of McCarthyism marked the point when the percentage of union members began to decline.

Our history should tell us that radical ideas have always had a transformative power — especially the idea that while you might not live to see a new world, your children might, if you fought for it. In the 1930s and '40s, these ideas were propagated within unions by left-wing political organizations. A general radical culture reinforced them.

Today, most unions no longer have this left presence. Can the labor movement itself fulfill this role? At the very least, unions need a large core of activists at all levels who are unafraid of radical ideas of social justice, and who can link them to immediate bread-and-butter economic issues.

And since good ideas are worthless unless they reach people, the labor movement has to be able to communicate that vision to workers outside its own ranks. In an era when many unions have discontinued their own publications, or turned them into ones light on content, they need exactly the opposite.

This is a very important moment in which a national debate and discussion can have real-life consequences for the future. It can provide a powerful impetus to organizing an anti-Bush coalition in the short term, and a more profound political realignment in the longer term.

The present period is not unlike the 1920s, which were also filled with company unions, the violence of strikebreakers, and a lack of legal rights for workers. A decade later, those obstacles were swept away. An upsurge of millions in the 1930s, radicalized by the Depression and left-wing activism, forced corporate acceptance of labor for the first time in the country's history.

The current changes taking place in U.S. unions may be the beginning of something as large and profound. If they are, then the obstacles unions face today can become historical relics as quickly as did those of an earlier era.

Social Security Protests

from page four

"Instead of the guaranteed security of the present safety net, Bush and Wall Street have created a phony crisis that will place low-income people at the mercy of the gambling den of the stock market. Chance will replace security and many, many seniors will be left destitute as a result."

Berkeley resident Frances Hailman said, "Bush rushed us into war without envisioning where it would lead us. We are now stuck in a situation that is draining our country's common wealth. Now he would have us agree to a hurried change in Social Security, with no clear examination of long-term consequences. Let's not be fooled again!"

Activist Marta Russell said, "What is to stop the conservatives from delivering a blow to the Disability Insurance Trust Fund (a separate account in the U.S. Treasury) as they plan for the retirement fund? If the Bushites succeed in their privatization scheme and funds are diverted from the Trust Fund into stock market accounts, the pool of monies available to pay out on current retirees will shrink to an estimated $2 trillion shortfall. That will unravel the fund, shrink the common pool of funds and jeopardize SSDI. How can the disability insurance system stay intact while the retirement system is destroyed?"

The struggle to save Social Security from Wall Street will continue as groups across the nation form in opposition to the scheme to privatize Social Security.

Anyone can join the Rolling Letter Campaign with Social Security Now!, by sending an e-mail to socialsecuritynow-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

Mosque Sheltered Jews

from page 11

used truncheons and water hoses to separate mothers from the younger children.

The adolescents and their mothers were taken to Drancy (the French camp from where trains departed for the east) and then deported to Auschwitz. The 3,500 younger children left behind had been taken on the initiative of Vichy's prime minister, Pierre Laval — the Germans had not requested it. The Vichy government waited for Berlin to authorize their deportation. When approval came, the children were packed into boxcars, each with a few adults. All were killed in the gas chambers on arrival.

The thought of such moments of ultimate darkness used to obscure the entire world for me. As I have pieced together the many stories I have heard and read over the years, I became able to simultaneously see light shining in many places. The story of the Muslims who saved Jewish children is one that affirmed that vision.

The words of the Kabyl tract read to poor immigrant men taught me to trust whispers of unity: Those dead children are like myself. They are like my own children. So are the Israeli children killed in bombed-out buses. So are Iraqi children lost as "collateral damage" and the million Palestinian children who every day must struggle with fear — of Israeli soldiers with machine guns, tanks, bulldozers, helicopters, rockets — and the many dead and wounded among them.

[With gratitude to Derri Berkani, whose film *Une Resistance Inconnu: La Mosquée de Paris* introduced me to this story. This article initially appeared in *Turning Wheel*, the journal of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship.]

U.S. Government Officials Have No Solutions to Poverty

from page six

It seems reasonable to assume that homelessness in the United States will not be substantially curbed, and certainly not eliminated, until such a plan is developed and implemented. But is it also certain that such steps will not be taken until and unless a much broader coalition of citizens take note, and get involved in a manner which creates an unavoidable demand for substantial reforms regarding the nation's approach to this problem.

Those uncertain as to how such a coalition might prove effective should devote serious attention to the stunning, recent activities in the Ukraine, not to mention the inspirational manner in which irrepressible senior citizens recently engineered an unprecedented government retreat by the Russian government regarding their retirement benefits.

In order to highlight the nature of the challenge before us, it seems appropriate to focus in this article on the people in government responsible for administering the nation's affairs regarding chronic homelessness. In subsequent articles, I will address other dimensions of that challenge, including budgeting criteria, the service provider industry, racism, education, globalization and the debilitating costs of ill-fated delusions of empire.

Currently, primary responsibility for coordinating the nation's business regarding homelessness is vested in politicians, and the units of government they ostensibly manage.

Unfortunately, very few of the politicians who possess the power and authority to lead the campaign required to eliminate chronic homelessness are up to the task. Moreover, there are few indications that the vast majority of them even understand the problem, let alone possess coherent ideas about how to get rid of it.

President Bush can be cited as a representative example of the problem. During his first term in office, he devoted scant attention to homelessness, despite the fact that the White House tends to be virtually surrounded by the multitudes of homeless people who inhabit the nation's capital.

President Bush's announced agenda for his second term suggests that he remains locked in the traditional mode of the political elite: devoting primary attention to the needs and desires of the wealthy and well off. Homelessness expanded during his first term, and every indication at this point is that it will continue to metastasize largely unabated during the next four years.

Bush rarely even mentioned chronic homelessness during his recent run for a second term in office. And if I am correct, he hasn't mentioned it since Election Day. In all fairness, he probably has opinions about chronic homelessness, and I would be surprised if he hasn't given a nod to the problem via budgetary allocations.

Nonetheless, the fact that chronic homelessness is not one of Bush's top priorities is undeniably clear. His most important thoughts are directed toward other matters, including foreign military adventures, whose long-term fiscal impact will almost certainly ratchet up the number of homeless people in this country.

California's governor is a self-selected victim of the same mode of tradition-bound, unbalanced thinking regarding chronic social problems characteristic of President Bush. The same is true of the vast majority of legislators, mayors, judges and other elected and appointed officials who preside over the nation's public affairs.



Homeless people have been abandoned by political leaders. Robert Terrell photo

President Bush remains locked in the traditional mode of the political elite: devoting primary attention to the needs and desires of the wealthy and well off. Homelessness expanded during his first term, and every indication is that it will continue to metastasize.

Lest I leave myself vulnerable to the unfounded allegation that I am only conscious of the shortcomings of conservative members of the ruling elite, I should note that liberals also have a sorry record of evasion, incompetence and failure regarding chronic homelessness.

California is an allegedly liberal state, but its record regarding chronic homelessness is not categorically superior to the ones established by conservative states. Some might note that California is different from conservative states because it spends more money per capita on the problem than many of them, and because it sponsors an incomparably broad array of services for homeless people.

This is true. But it is also true that programs that simply service homeless victims are categorically inferior to those that accomplish its elimination. Moreover, here in California, where liberals have dominated government for decades, chronic homelessness is endemic in every major city, and too many small ones to list.

One should also note that here in California, as is the case in many other states across the nation where government is dominated by liberals, homelessness is a distinguished source of employment for those who have the good fortune to garner financial support from liberal politicians, and their patronage-dispensing cadres.

Finally, as regards to the shortcomings of government, I think it imperative to note that these days neither conservative nor liberal spokespersons talk about eliminating homelessness. They have already given up on that goal, even though most indications are that the problem is worsening.

The seriousness of this surrender is underscored by the fact that very few representatives of the political elite have anything noteworthy to say about steps that need to be taken to minimize, if not eliminate, the sources of chronic homelessness.

As a result, steps that should be taken to help those currently on the socioeconomic treadmill toward homelessness and street-side living are not being taken.

There are numerous historical precedents for our current situation. For example, during the last years of China's Manchu Dynasty, the society was in dire need of leadership by educated people functioning in a rational manner.

Unfortunately, China was led at the time by a coterie of essentially clueless, aristocratic figures, who had been trained to govern a social order far different from the one they inherited.

Moreover, the vast majority of the finely clothed, handsomely compensated aristocrats were not emotionally or intellectually predisposed to implement the sorts of reforms that might have preserved the dynasty as it attempted the difficult task of responding to the arrival of modernity via legions of aggressive foreign armies, mendacious missionaries and wickedly efficient Western economic practices.

While the aristocrats dithered in confusion about what to do, the dynasty collapsed. This catastrophic outcome thrust China into civil war, social chaos and revolutionary turmoil for the next half century.

For better or worse, the United States is faced with a set of critical problems and dire prospects ominously similar to those that prevailed in China immediately prior to the fall of the Manchu Dynasty.

For example, here in the United States, as was the case in late Manchu China, a huge, essentially unbridgeable economic gulf has emerged between the common people and those who occupy the top rungs of the nation's steeply hierarchical social order. As was the case with their Manchu counterparts, the ruling elite is distracted by idle modes of consumption, while wasting astonishingly large sums of money on whimsical military adventures.

And maybe most important, as was the case during the last days of the Manchu Dynasty, the nation's social and economic problems are being severely exacerbated because of dislocations engendered by new, devastatingly efficient economic forces controlled from abroad. The Chinese eventually came to refer to those economic forces as Western imperialism. Their contemporary equivalent is known here in the United States as globalization.

Thus, many formerly comfortably middle-class U.S. families are sinking inexorably into poverty, and an ominously growing number of poor people have been reduced to living and dying in the streets. The key point to be understood is that there is little substantive difference between a poor, homeless person dying on the streets of San Francisco today and a Chinese coolie doing the same thing a century ago along a fetid Shanghai roadway.

Faced with an escalating social crisis, the wealthy aristocrats at the pinnacle of China's steeply hierarchical social order didn't have the slightest idea about what to do to rectify the situation; and sooner or later we are going to have to acknowledge that the same is true of our contemporary aristocrats.

Furthermore, it should be noted that there is little in the personal and social backgrounds of the men and women who dominate the top decision-making positions in the U.S. government that one might cite as a potential source of wisdom regarding solutions to complicated social problems deeply rooted in atavistic traditions, poverty, abuse, inadequate education, obsolete job skills, untended health problems and poor nutrition.

Each of these complicated problems is being exacerbated by unprecedented economic competition from abroad. Thus, it is probably reasonable to assume that the winds of change currently undermining the fiscal viability of this nation's most economically vulnerable classes will exert an increasingly devastating impact during the years immediately ahead.

Given this, it is imperative that we implement radically different approaches to the task of eliminating chronic homelessness. But this cannot be accomplished unless and until a much larger swath of the U.S. populace comes to understand that this metastasizing problem is evidence that our society is engaged in a poorly understood, and generally unacknowledged, socioeconomic meltdown.

More people also need to understand that the vast majority of the political eunuchs currently in charge of the levers of authority and decision-making in government are not up to the task before them as regards to homelessness.

This means that more citizens must get actively involved in the process of developing the priorities and programs necessary for eliminating this social cancer. The longer it takes for this to occur, the more serious the problem will become.

If we wait too long to move in this direction, our current social order, or dynasty if you will, shall almost certainly end up ensconced in the same dustbin of history that currently contains the dismal, discarded remains of its Manchu predecessor.